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Pwyll Prince of Dyfed: the narrative structure

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READERS generally agree that the four branches of the *Mabinogi* prose tales, preserved in medieval Welsh manuscripts from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, are masterpieces of swift and graceful style, enchanting equally in their vivid detail and succinct understatement. Yet the structure of the narratives as a whole remains a puzzle. The varied plot elements combined in each—remnants of archaic myths, bits of heroic legends, folk tales, onomastic interpretations, and even historical events—all these pieces, developed over several centuries in an oral repertoire before finding a place in written narrative, combine in an elusive, yet somehow meaningful, whole. Some scholars, such as W. J. Gruffydd and Bernard Harder, see the tales as organically unified by the hero Pryderi along the patterns of the archetypal myth of the hero native to all early literatures.¹ Others, such as K. H. Jackson and Proinsias Mac Cana, argue that the four branches had no continuous development in a pre-literary tradition and are in fact ill-woven remnants of a number of earlier stories pieced together by a clever writer who possibly did not fully understand his material.² None of the critics seems willing to deal with another problem in the branches: although supposedly composed or compiled by a churchman of South Wales, possibly a bishop,³ only *Manawydan Son of Llŷr* contains the

¹ W. J. Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy* (Cardiff, 1928); and Bernard D. Harder, 'Cradle of the Gods: Birth of the Hero in Medieval Narrative', *University of Windsor Review*, 10, No. 1 (1974), 45-54.

² K. H. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff, 1961), and Proinsias Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr* (Cardiff, 1958).

Glyn E. Jones, 'Early Prose: *The Mabinogi*', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, i, edd. A. O. H. Jarmon and Gwilym Rees Hughes, (Swansea, 1976), 194, argues convincingly that the two feasts in *Branwen* represent the same feast from two separate versions, but he suggests that simple expedience determined the inclusion of both feasts: the author thereby 'neatly side-stepped the difficulty arising from having two different localities for the feast in his sources' (p. 195). I would suggest instead that the author favoured the symmetry of repetition.

³ The identity of the author as a monk, Rhygyfarch, and the date of composition as around 1099 were first suggested by Sir Ifor Williams, and these opinions are generally accepted. See R. M. Jones, *Highlights in Welsh Literature: Talks with a Prince* (Wales, 1969), 34. Glyn E. Jones, op. cit. 193, suggests Sulien, a bishop, or his son, as the author; T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Date of the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1970, pp. 263-98, argues most persuasively for a date somewhere between 1050 and 1120.

slightest trace of Christianity, and there it is introduced as 'local colour', the enchanter of Dyfed appearing in the disguises of clerk, priest, and bishop. None of the branches can be made to have a religious significance, and critics treat them as pure entertainment.

Since each of the branches presents a relatively complex narrative structure and an interplay of several related themes, I will not attempt to deal with all of them at this time. Rather, taking *Pwyll Prince of Dyfed*¹ as an integral whole, I will argue that it is in fact structured in a manner reflecting conscious artifice rather than simply organic association, and that the repetition of certain motifs and themes represents artistic intention rather than a naïve mis-handling of sources. A similar analysis of structure has been undertaken by Seán Ó Coileáin in 'A Thematic Study of the Tale *Pwyll Penduic Dyuet*' (*Studia Celtica*, 12-13 (1977-8), 78-82). His presentation includes a most useful schema of the tale, dividing it into two parts—rather than three, as I will later suggest—with a kind of coda attached to the second. Although Ó Coileáin does approach the structure as a set of repetitive patterns, he does not suggest any overriding concept that would necessarily cause the artist to put together these particular incidents or to insert certain changes in the traditional shape of these *topoi*. I will suggest that a mythic reading of *Pwyll* provides us with the source of that artistic unity, but that the tale's underlying structure builds on the motif of the restoration of the wasteland, rather than on the life of the hero Pryderi. This submerged mythic structure, however, is put to use as the controlling metaphor for an instructive, if highly fictionalized and therefore entertaining, book of governance. If instruction as well as amusement lies at the core of *Pwyll*, its composition by a monk or religious is more readily understandable. I leave to some later exploration the possibility that the other branches also reflect this motif, theme, and purpose, but I shall in passing suggest that the structure and meaning of *Pwyll* offer a line of inquiry into the interconnections of the four branches of the *Mabinogi*.

Critics seeing a mythic unity in the four branches generally base their readings on the cycle of the hero Pryderi's conception and birth (*Pwyll*), his early exploits (*Branwen Daughter of Llŷr*), his enchantment or imprisonment (*Manawydan*), and his eventual death (*Math Son of Mathonwy*). But such a reading must ignore much of the stories as they now exist. The conception and birth of Pryderi takes up only one of the three major parts of *Pwyll*; he is barely mentioned in *Branwen* as one of the seven survivors of the great battle of Ireland; and his role in both *Manawydan* and *Math* is secondary to those of the title characters. No doubt the archetype of the hero forms a part of

¹ The translation I use throughout is the readily available Everyman edition, *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (1949; reprinted New York, 1975).

the background of each branch, but it cannot explain the actual form each narrative takes. As any creative artist must be, the writer (or writers) of each story was engrossed in the matter at hand; the critic should accept that artistic preoccupation and, having acknowledged the mythic possibilities, examine what the artist actually made of that material. In *Pwyll*, the 'matter' is Pwyll; and while the story involves the conception and birth of Pryderi, it relies on the restoration of the wasteland as its primary plot motif and replicates that motif, as I shall demonstrate, in each of its three segments.

The restoration of the wasteland, familiar to most readers from Frazer, involves the enchantment of a once fertile land so that its fields lie fallow and its king becomes disabled, a disability usually taken as sexual and often symbolized by wounded foot, thigh, or eyes. Regenerative powers are restored by the arrival of a young hero in this 'other world'. He solves a puzzle, demonstrating wisdom (the Oedipus version), or defeats an enemy, often a dragon or other magical beast (as with Perseus). The kingdom then rejoices in a new prosperity and often the young hero marries the daughter of the old king and replaces him as ruler. Frazer's work and later archaeological findings, such as those by P. V. Glob,¹ indicate that the story had its origin in a rite of the calendar in which the old king, either in person or by surrogate, was sacrificed to the Earth Mother to ensure the return of Spring and fertility.

By the eleventh century (and probably much earlier), the folk-myth elements of the ritual were forgotten, but the plot-line and a number of the mythic *topoi* persisted in innumerable tales embellished by contemporary social forms and manners. For instance, the Chaste Friend/Brother motif, noted by Ó Coileáin, is a variation on the exchange of places between old king and new king; the stag-hunt and quest of the supernatural bride, elements of the Sovereignty theme, noted by I. C. Lovecy,² are revised in *Pwyll* to accord with certain medieval customs; and so on. The most important group of tales employing the wasteland motif, as pointed out by Jessie Weston, belongs to the Grail legend, in which the Chalice of the Last Supper merges with the fabulous cornucopia or Cauldron of Plenty in Gaelic and Celtic myth and receives a place in the Arthurian cycle cherished by Anglo-Norman knights. While in the Arthurian version the restoration of the wasteland becomes a metaphor for Christian duty and salvation, in *Pwyll Prince of Dyfed* the motif forms a plot within which the author may demonstrate the

¹ P. V. Glob, *The Bog People*, trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (Ithaca, New York, 1969). Glob's findings indicate the ritual was practised as late as the first century AD by tribes on the Jutland peninsula.

² See 'The Celtic Sovereignty Theme and the Structure of *Peredur*', *Studia Celtica*, 12-13 (1977-8), 133-46, where Lovecy discusses Glenys Goetinck's *Peredur: A Study of Welsh Tradition in the Grail Legends* (Cardiff, 1975).

various secular virtues of the good ruler: wisdom, prudence, courtesy, concern for the people, respect for the law, and so on. Each of the three segments of the story replicates the wasteland motif, thereby revealing an architectonic rather than organic structure. The medieval trappings—hunting-scenes, courtly feasts, romantic dialogue—disguise the ancient myth, but provide it with contemporaneity.

In the first segment, Pwyll, riding out to hunt, baits his dogs on a stag run by another huntsman, Arawn prince of Annwn, the Celtic 'other world'. The hunting of magic animals, as Rachel Bromwich notes, is a recurrent episode in the Celtic dynastic tradition,¹ but here the motif is given a distinctly medieval and verisimilar flavour: Pwyll has committed a breach of medieval etiquette in running another man's quarry and now owes the lord a favour, a natural excuse for the two to change places. Yet Pwyll obviously has some special charm or power in him, for Arawn predicts, rightly, that Pwyll will easily defeat a long-time enemy in the other world, Hafgan of Annwn. Pwyll successfully proves his growth in courtesy by remaining chaste with Arawn's queen, by meeting Hafgan at the appointed tryst, and by refusing to slay his opponent as he lies wounded and helpless. The writer thus interweaves contemporary medieval preoccupations with manners and morals into the fabric of the older mythic 'exchange' between a mortal and a supernatural being, an element of the calendar sacrifice in which the mortal becomes divine by dying and thereby ensures the return of the new year. As is often the case in medieval romance, the mythic elements, such as Pwyll's transformation, appear as 'magic', and are thus 'explained' or rationalized—both for the audience and for the author, who is dealing with symbolic elements whose original meaning is by now obscure. Thus Harder is incorrect in claiming that the chief conflict in the *Mabinogi* is 'between the magical forces of chaos and the human need for social order and peace' (p. 49), for magic is in fact the chief means of achieving social order, both within this segment and in the courting of Rhiannon.

During the year of Pwyll's exchange, both kingdoms thrive: Hafgan's land is joined to Arawn's, and Pwyll's people exclaim they have never been so well ruled. While the medieval author is careful not to indicate that the previous rule has been bad, Dyfed has clearly been elevated to a higher state through the exchange. Pwyll's sojourn in the other world is both a demonstration of his worthiness and a means to increased wisdom in his rule: he promises to continue the reasonableness, love, and generosity which Arawn has demonstrated. Annwn, a land of death, becomes a gateway to rebirth both physical and spiritual, and to increased wisdom. Like other heroes who visit

¹ 'Celtic Dynastic Themes and the Breton Lays', *Études celtiques*, 9 (1960-1), 439-74.

the other world, Pwyll's special powers enable him first, to be chosen for the journey, and second, to complete successfully the tasks posed in the other world.¹ His re-emergence to the mortal world and his new title, Lord of Annwn, connect him to the archetypal sacred corn king who, symbolically planted in the earth, rises again as the new king, both representing and effecting the renewal of the earth in Spring.

Harder and Gruffydd, in keeping with their interpretations of the *Mabinogi* as the story of the hero, insist that a continuing hostility must exist between Pwyll and Arawn, since Pryderi is later carried off to the other world, once in the third segment of *Pwyll* and a second time in the *Manawydan*. Harder suggests that Pwyll (presumably in some earlier version) slays Arawn, thereby replacing him, and that Pryderi is a son of the other world later mystically reborn to the mortal world. Gruffydd suggests that Pwyll is in fact the king of Annwn who, having always loved Rhiannon, tricks her mortal husband into changing places. The mortal husband later imprisons Pryderi in Annwn in revenge. But these versions, however valid as mythic archetypes, belie the actual narrative, which states that Pwyll and Arawn grow in friendship, each grateful for the other's good offices. This part of the branch would be rendered nonsensical by continued hostility between the princes, but if, as I propose, the branch displaces the myth in order to model courtesy and wisdom, the great strengths of the good ruler, the reconciliation of Pwyll and Arawn provides a satisfactory close to this segment. The focus here is not on Pryderi, who is yet to be conceived, but on the wise rule that promotes a prosperous kingdom.

The second episode, the courtship of Rhiannon, demonstrates again the need for courtesy and wisdom in a ruler. Underlying the plot structure is again the motif of the wasteland restored, for the marriage symbolizes, as is customary, the fertility of the prosperous kingdom. Rhiannon in Celtic mythology is a goddess from the other world, the Earth Mother herself. In this medieval version, her connections to the myth are called forth by the mound where Pwyll waits—traditionally a gateway to the other world—by the magic steed that outpaces all pursuers, by her possession of the unfillable

¹ Nora K. Chadwick, 'The Borderland of the Spirit World in Early European Literature', *Trivium*, 2 (1967), 17-19, notes that the voyage to the underworld is typically a brush with death and mentions that the king or hero usually 'returns home enriched by the knowledge he has acquired through his super-natural experiences' (p. 19). She finds it 'curious' that the underworld sojourn is commonly one year (p. 20), yet Frazer, Robert Graves, and Joseph Campbell all point to the associations of this journey with the calendar, the cycle of the seasons.

As Harder points out in 'Cradle of the Gods', both Jung and Campbell connect the theme of rebirth to the motif of the descent to the underworld (p. 47). All these themes are later displacements of the sacred king's escape from death and immortalization, either by offering a surrogate to the goddess or by outwitting her. Later still, as Neumann suggests, the motif comes to represent the search for wisdom.

bag (a womb symbol), and by her knowledge of the future and her wisdom in dealing with Gwawl. But the medieval Welsh author completely displaces the elements of Rhiannon's mythic divinity in the aura of magic, exactly as do his near-contemporaries, Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes, in treating mythic themes. Her marriage to Pwyll at the end of this segment is a displacement of the ritual marriage of the sacred king to the earth goddess. But in this medieval version, the marriage takes second place to the courtship. And the couple's challenge by Gwawl becomes a test and demonstration of wisdom, although he is finally overcome through the magic powers of the goddess. The two parts of this segment, the courtship and the test by Gwawl, each provide a symmetrical parallel to the other episodes.

As in the first segment, Pwyll in courting Rhiannon learns courtesy. After two futile attempts to catch her, he finally addresses her politely: 'For his sake whom thou lovest best, stay for me.' Rhiannon responds with archaic understatement: 'It had been better for the horse hadst thou asked this long since.' But she soon reveals a long-standing passion for him. Surrounded by the aura of magic, the encounter none the less displays the author's regard for manners. The two open their hearts to each other, again through courteous speech, and the wedding feast is set for the magical year from that day.

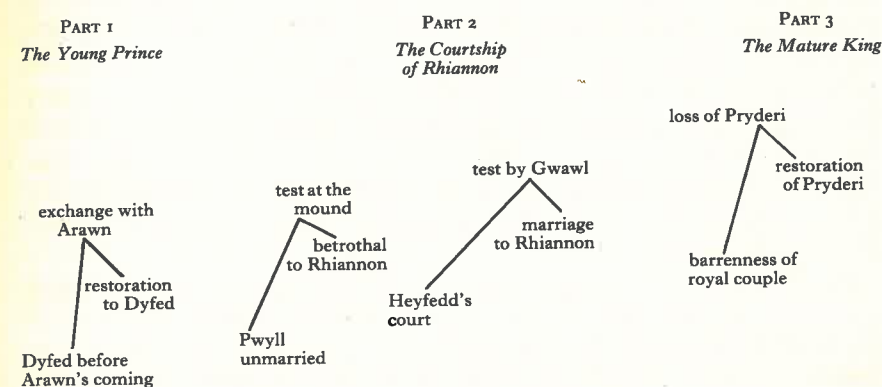
In the second part of this episode, although Rhiannon has been won, Pwyll now faces other obstacles to their marriage: he demonstrates a lack of wisdom in his rash promise to Gwawl. But as is often the case in medieval romance, the woman who is the object of the quest or struggle reveals to the chosen hero the means to her rescue. So Olwen assists Culhwch, and Isolde aids Tristan. We might read into the narrative an earlier, mythic attempt by a usurper, Gwawl, to replace the sacred king before the end of his reign, or conversely, Pwyll may be the usurper who successfully removes the old priest or extends the duration of his own reign, since Gwawl claims Rhiannon was previously promised to him. However, the purposes of the medieval writer override whatever was in the earlier raw material of the story: Rhiannon urges granting the boon to Gwawl, lest dishonour fall on Pwyll, thus instructing the ruler in his duty. A year later, Gwawl at his wedding feast in turn rashly promises a boon to Pwyll, thereby providing a perfectly symmetrical parallel to the earlier scene. When Gwawl, tricked into entering the unfillable bag, the reverse cornucopia, is at last beaten, Pwyll, having learned his lesson, now demands sureties that Gwawl will not seek vengeance; he is ruled fully in this caution by the advice of Rhiannon and her father Hefeydd. Thus the folk motif of The Rash Promise becomes a lesson in prudent governance. The story demonstrates fully the need for

caution in dealing with enemies, for seeking and following sage counsel, and for generosity in sharing prosperity in good fortune: no one leaves empty-handed either that feast or the subsequent celebration at Dyfed. The marriage represents peace and plenty and parallels the restored order found at the close of the first segment.

In the final sequence, the fertility of the married couple is tested, as is Pwyll's wisdom for a third time. Fertility, the birth of a son and heir, confirms the 'restored' state of the kingdom, but it also remains a duty and practical necessity for the ruler in medieval politics. Pwyll's people 'feel heaviness of heart' at seeing the royal marriage barren, a wasteland motif perhaps 'caused' mythically by Rhiannon's use of her unfillable bag. Pwyll now wisely postpones the request that he put aside Rhiannon, and in a year she bears a child. Likewise, he refuses again to put her aside when she is unjustly accused of murder, yet he maintains order by allowing her to perform a penance: the claims on him as a private person must bow to the claims of public law. Their son Pryderi's theft by the Sid finds numerous parallels in Irish folk stories. But the author does not connect this theft to the Annwn of the first segment: Annwn is a place of light, music, poetry, and dance; the fearsome claw that Teyrnon fights belongs to the dark and horrifying aspects of the Night-Mare, the Hag. The threat to Pryderi's life is overcome by the good vassal, who, immediately upon realizing the boy's identity, returns him to his parents. Pwyll's wisdom, generosity, and love are thus repaid in kind by his people, as is appropriate in the well-ordered state. The author of *Pwyll* again deploys the magical elements primarily as a strategy for capturing the reader's interest and turning it to the lesson to be conveyed.

Rhiannon's bearing of strangers in penance probably goes back to an ancient rite of ritual prostitution, practised at one time throughout the Mediterranean as a means of ensuring fertility in the kingdom. Her son's refusal to be 'borne' would then mean an avoidance of incest, a second, forbidden 'bearing'. But, for the medieval writer and audience, Pryderi's refusal marks his wisdom and justice at an early age; it confirms his identity as the true heir. The episode concludes satisfactorily with Rhiannon justified, the faithful retainer richly rewarded, the youth named and placed with Pendaran of Dyfed, and the nobles of the land pledged to an alliance with the acknowledged heir. Again, this third segment symmetrically parallels the other two: order and prosperity have been restored through heroic action, the demonstration of prudence and patience by the royal couple, and of strength, loyalty, and truth by their vassal. The narrator now swiftly ties up the ends of the story, taking us rapidly through the rearing of the youth, the uneventful years closing Pwyll and Rhiannon's reign, the peaceful death of the old king, and the rule of Pryderi up to his own marriage, ensuring potentially the continuity of Pwyll's line.

Each segment contains relatively little action of the sort typically found in medieval romances: quests and battles are virtually absent; the love element is but briefly entertained and then quickly submerged in the war of wits between Gwawl and Rhiannon. But each part demonstrates the growth in wisdom, courtesy, and generosity of the good king, first as youthful prince, then as married ruler, and finally as older father. While the incidents form a chronology, they also create a pattern of repetition: test of courtesy and wisdom, growth in knowledge, and restoration of order manifested in prosperity and gift-giving and the happiness of the subjects. *Pwyll*'s narrative structure depends upon this repeated pattern, rather than simply organic and chronological links, for coherence and unity. It is the type of architectonic pattern, repetition with variation, relished by medieval audiences,¹ and it might be schematized as follows, the uppermost points representing dramatic turns in each section:



Underlying this pattern is the folk version of the wasteland myth, which usually involves a passage to the other world, the increase of wisdom and virtue, a marriage, and the restored fertility and prosperity of king and people.

The other branches of the *Mabinogion* also demonstrate elements of the wasteland myth: in *Branwen* we find the cauldron with power to restore life and the years of forgetfulness in an 'other world' as the

¹ J. Angela Carson, in 'The Structure and Meaning of The Dream of Rhonabwy', *Philological Quarterly*, 53 (1974), 289-303, argues convincingly for a similar structure of repeated parallel patterns in this difficult narrative: a series of messengers pass between the camps of various fighters who are either intending war or playing at war in the chess game. The *Dream*, she claims, represents instruction in right and wrong wars and seeks to heal the factionalism in Welsh attitudes towards the English: the bards at the close of the narrative praise the truce offered by the Saxon king Osla, and lament the 'bitter futility of brother being at odds with brother' (p. 303). Although I would take exception to her dating of the *Dream*, her views on the purpose of the story, the instruction of Welsh nobility, coincide with my own opinions about *Pwyll* and lend some credence to the idea that the *Mabinogi* were considered instructive as well as entertaining literature.

surviving heroes feast merrily. The birds of Rhiannon, souls in the land of the dead, sing sweetly to the warriors. Bendigeidfran himself, wounded in the foot by a spear, as befits a sacred king, is the mythic prototype of the Fisher King in the Grail romances. In *Manawydan*, Dyfed is reduced to a wasteland by Llwyd's avenging of Gwawl, but it is restored by the penance and wit of Manawydan. In *Math*, Pryderi is tricked out of the magic swine of Annwn, symbols of both wisdom and fertility in Celtic myth, and the result is turmoil in the land and the rape of Math's maiden. The brothers Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, who destroy the peace, must perform penance as calendar animals, magically producing a child each of three years. The pursuit of a structuring order among these branches is the task of another, much longer, work; however, the idea that Pryderi is the link among them must be taken into question. In *Branwen* we find a serious anachronism in that Pendaran Dyfed, the nobleman to whom Pryderi was entrusted for his education, is twice mentioned as a young lad on the expedition to Ireland while Pryderi is a grown warrior. In *Math* Pryderi's magic swine form an important element of the plot, but his death early in the story eliminates him completely from the audience's attention, and only by gross exaggeration could one claim the narrative is about him. In fact, although the four branches appear together in both the Red Book and the White Book, only the *Pwyll* and *Manawydan* are closely related in locale, chronology, and theme.

Pwyll Prince of Dyfed, whatever its connection to the other branches, remains in itself an integral, skilfully woven narrative. If the work is viewed as a book of governance, designed, as I suggest, to both instruct and delight, we have a reasonable explanation of why an eleventh-century cleric of St. David's in South Wales might have created a work based on native pagan myth with almost no trace of Christianity. The myth of the wasteland restored provides a suitable vehicle for a pleasingly symmetrical plot and conveys admirably the lessons of wisdom and courtesy which the medieval author wished to set before a contemporary noble audience. The work need not contain Christian references, for it does not concern the individual soul, but rather the workings of the State. If Charles-Edwards is correct in dating the *Mabinogi* in the late eleventh century, its non-clerical nature may in fact have enhanced its credence for a not fully Christianized court, experiencing prosperity and prestige in a local cultural renaissance.