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Title of extract: **Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches**

Name of Author: **Winward, F.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable)

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable): **Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies Vol 34 1997**

Publisher: **CMCS**

Pages scanned: **77 - 106**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Y Mabinogi CYCS7015**

Name of Designated Person

authorising scanning:

Date authorised: 16.03.17.

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Some Aspects of the Women in *The Four Branches*

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INTRODUCTION

THE women are often held to be the most memorable characters in *The Four Branches*,¹ but the reasons for this have not yet been satisfactorily explored. Perhaps the most immediate explanation is revealed by comparison with the other women in the medieval Welsh Mabinogion. By careful characterization, by 'rich and controlled use of language and ... wealth of intricate, and often frustratingly complex, narrative detail',² the author of *The Four Branches* is able to create realistic portrayals. This contrasts with the often flat female figures of the other prose tales, in which women are cast from the outset as good or bad and, thus defined, tend not to deviate from their respective realms. The latter approach is of course the traditional one, as Mann notes: 'The polarised nature of medieval attitudes to women is notorious. Eve is set against Mary, the sensual deceiver against maternal purity, rebelliousness against meekness'.³ Such attitudes in Welsh literature are best illustrated by *Culhwch and Olwen*, in which women are easily divided into the troublemakers, represented by various hags and the witch-wife of King Doged, and those placed on a pedestal, represented by the exquisitely described Olwen and the 'merchet euryrchogyon' ('golden-torqued women')⁴ invoked in Arthur's court.

It is, however, necessary to bear in mind that the folktale style—and indeed the (self-)parodic nature—of *Culhwch and Olwen* does not lend itself to anything but stock characters of both genders. Nevertheless, the polarity of attitudes to women is also found in less

¹Sioned Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi: Pedair Keinc y Mabinogi* (Llandysul, 1993), p. 76, citing the support of Roberta L. Valente, 'Merched y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1986). ²Juliette Wood, 'The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature', *CMCS* 10 (Winter 1985), 25–38 (p. 25). ³Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Hemel Hempstead, 1991), p. 1. ⁴*Culhwch and Olwen*, edited by Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans (Cardiff, 1992), line 357.

superficial tales: the tranquil Elen in *The Dream of Macsen* is, by the very nature of the emperor's dream, placed upon a pedestal—or, more literally, on a chair of red-gold—before her entrance proper. Even the Three Romances propagate such polarization: in contrast to Gwenhwyfar and the myriad of maidenly victims of injustice and misfortune encountered by the errant knights are the murderous hags such as the one Peredur dispatches: 'Peredur a gyrchwys y widon ac a'e trewis a chledyf ar y pen yny ledawd y helym a'e ffenffestin mal dyscyl ar y phen' ('Peredur attacked the witch and struck her on the head with a sword until her helmet and mail-cap spread like a dish on her head').⁵ Although Enid in *Gereint* might be put forth as a pedestal-worthy woman displaying disobedience to her husband and thus not conforming to the meek stereotype, her behaviour is ultimately selfless, an inevitable symptom of her unwavering devotion to Gereint that does not bestow any great complexity of character upon her.

In comparison the women in *The Four Branches* are far less easily categorized and tend towards a more convincing fusion of characteristics: while Rhiannon's air of inapproachability might initially align her with the pedestal-worthy she is far too spirited to be neatly identified with the Mary figure; Goewin and Branwen, who are at first identifiable with this stereotype, are not so meek as to suffer their shame in silence; Blodeuwedd, moulded as the perfect woman, becomes the sensual deceiver. Unlike the often rather lame interaction between the characters of other prose tales,⁶ the author is also interested in what Ford terms the 'battle of the sexes': 'Indeed, he seems to be at his narrative best when reporting conversation between men and women and probing the psychological realities between them'.⁷

It is this three-dimensional approach to character portrayal that makes *The Four Branches* more enlightened than the other prose tales, but it does not explain why the women in *The Four Branches* are so much more memorable than their male counterparts. In order to explain this, Mac Cana sees the author's skill in characterization as gender-specific: 'Apart from Manawydan, and Gwydion to some extent, the female characters are the most strongly delineated'.⁸ Valente meanwhile suggests that a reason for this is that while the

men have more lines of dialogue, their speeches owe more to general techniques of storytelling, such as standard greetings and stock responses, than those of the women.⁹ However, Mac Cana's choice of characters that are well formed seems a little illiberal: the portrayals of Matholwch, Efnisien, and Pwyll surely deserve to be termed thus also.

While Valente's theory that male speech is more frequently formulaic seems plausible, it presents a number of difficulties. First, it fails to recognize that characterization is possible even within rigid structures of formality. When they first meet, Pwyll is prince of Dyfed but Arawn is a crowned king of Annwn and thus outranks him. Having suffered discourtesy from Pwyll, Arawn refuses to greet Pwyll, but Pwyll, rather than taking offence, suggests that Arawn's status might not require that he should. After Arawn has revealed his reason as Pwyll's discourtesy and made a formal declaration that in repayment he will take the value of one hundred stags in damage from Pwyll, Pwyll still does not show anger; furthermore, once he learns of Arawn's title he immediately pays homage: '“Arglwyd,” heb ynteu, “dyd da itt”' (“Lord”, he said, “good day to you”).¹⁰ Despite this conversation being defined by protocol, Pwyll's character is developed at every turn: we now see him as courteous, unruffled, and pacificatory. The second difficulty with Valente's theory is that it is based on the presumption that the women speak in less formal circumstances and so reveal more of their characters than their male counterparts. However, more often than not, and in line with the author's interest in the 'battle of the sexes', the women's speeches are addressed to the men, and thus both genders are in a situation where they are able to speak informally: the men do not continue to talk to their wives in formulaic patterns of greetings and responses, as may be observed in the tender dialogue between Arawn and his wife, or Teyrnnon and his wife. Lastly, Valente's theory gives the impression that in their speeches the women are somehow commentators on, rather than participants in, public interaction, freed from the formulaic necessities of social etiquette, speaking their minds rather than speaking as convention dictates. This article seeks to demonstrate, however, that women are frequently seen getting their own way by using social etiquette, exploiting the pattern of formalities that exists between man and woman as well as between leader and leader.

Another, and perhaps more convincing, explanation for the

⁵*Historia Peredur vab Efwrc*, edited by Glenys Witchard Goetinck (Cardiff, 1976), pp. 29–30. ⁶*Chwedyl Gereint vab Erbin*, in *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch*, edited by J. G. Evans and R. M. Jones (Cardiff, 1973), p. 206: '“Ie”, heb y Gwen[hwyfar], “a welych ti yn uot yn iawn am hynny ti a Ger[eint]. Miui ae gwnaf yn llawen arglwyd”' (“Well”, said Gwenhwyfar, “what you see to be right concerning that, you and Geraint, I for my part will do willingly, Lord”). ⁷Introduction to *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, translated by Patrick K. Ford (London, 1977), p. 25.

⁸Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, second edition (Cardiff, 1992), p. 55.

⁹Merched y Mabinogi', p. 107. ¹⁰*Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, edited by Ifor Williams, second edition (Cardiff, 1951), p. 2. All quotations from *The Four Branches* will be taken from this edition; translations are my own. Ifor Williams's punctuation is retained in the quotations.

memorability of the women (due in part to their manipulation of convention) is their independence, their ability to instigate events and sometimes control their own fates. However, this too brings its problems. Most energy has been channelled not into exploring the mechanics of this independence within the narrative but into tracing its origins back to the various manifestations of the sovereignty goddess, following the method used by Tomás Ó Máille when investigating the portrayal of Medb in Old Irish literature.¹¹ The immediate problem with such methodology is that 'nowhere in Welsh is there any specific Sovereignty figure'¹² and thus no native paradigm of divinity with which to compare the women in *The Four Branches*. Nevertheless, powerful female characters have been interpreted as goddesses. Because Rhiannon enters the tale on horseback, because her two punishments have equine associations (first acting as beast of burden; secondly holding the collars of asses around her neck), and because Pryderi gives her and the land to Manawydan in the Third Branch, she has been given divine status on the grounds that 'the worship of and connection between the horse and the fertility goddess, known among the continental Celts as Epona, has been documented as common practice in Europe'.¹³ However, while scholars have shown that it is beyond question that *The Four Branches* have inherited mythological remnants, this has received too much emphasis, as Mac Cana's reading of Rhiannon, Aranrhod, and Blodeuwedd may suggest: 'This formidable trio of women owes its dramatic impact more to the resonance of tradition than to the pen of the author'.¹⁴ This seems a brave claim, particularly in the light of Mac Cana's own view of an author shaping only 'the shattered remains of a mythology':¹⁵ while at the very most the vestiges of myths may place women in certain situations and empower them to a certain extent, it is surely dangerous to imply that their characterization was also inherited, particularly when all three of these women are given very different traits and have very different ways of upholding their independence, as will be shown. Tradition can only provide the impetus; skilful portrayal provides the dramatic impact. Meanwhile, formidable in their own way are Cigfa, Goewin, and

¹¹'Medb Chruachna', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 17 (1927–28), 129–46. ¹²I. C. Lovecy, 'The Celtic Sovereignty Theme and the Structure of *Peredur*', *Studia Celtica*, 12/13 (1977–78), 133–46 (p. 135). See also Máire Herbert, 'Goddess and King: The Sacred Marriage in Early Ireland', in *Women and Sovereignty*, edited by L. O. Fradenburg, Cosmos, 7 (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 264–75, for a view of the Irish sacred marriage and sovereignty goddess as mutating 'metamyth'. ¹³Erica J. Sessle, 'Exploring the Limitations of the Sovereignty Goddess through the Role of Rhiannon', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 14 (1994), 9–13 (pp. 10–11). I am grateful to the author for making the typescript available in advance of publication. Upholders of the goddess theory include Ford, Mac Cana, and W. J. Gruffydd. ¹⁴*The Mabinogi*, p. 57. ¹⁵*ibid.*, p. 52.

Cymidei Cymeinfoll: are we to assume that they too are the remnants of goddesses?¹⁶ Such dangers of applying the methodology of Ó Máille too strictly have been explored by Sessle:

The examination of the female characters of the *Mabinogi* based upon the criteria of the Irish literary tradition tends to lead to misinterpretation. . . . When Rhiannon is only allowed to function within the realm of a goddess of sovereignty, one fails to explore her character as a literary figure.¹⁷

A modern critic of *Wuthering Heights* would not regard the literary function of Heathcliff as altered in the light of the fact that his stormy temperament and self-destructiveness owed much to the nature and experiences of Brontë's dissolute brother, Branwell.¹⁸ In the same way, while it is both interesting and necessary to explore the euhemerized sovereignty goddess, such an investigation is entirely misplaced when examining *The Four Branches* as a literary work, particularly so when such a mythological inheritance, as Mac Cana suggests above, is far from solid. McKenna has suggested that a new approach to the material is required:

A re-examination would assume that the text was intended to be read as meaningful narrative by an audience which did not consist entirely of antiquarians or literary archaeologists and would look for the coherence it might have held for that contemporary audience.¹⁹

This article will at least set out to explore the material without the 'help' of sovereignty goddesses, to examine the nature of the women's independence without reverting to divine explanation, and to establish the reasons for the women's memorability.

A brief word is needed about recent scholarship about the women of *The Four Branches*. Roberta L. Valente, the first to have examined in detail the structural place of women in *The Four Branches*, has seen a running concern with violations of established gender roles.²⁰

¹⁶Jean Markale, in his *Women of the Celts*, translated by A. Mygind and others (London, 1975), p. 132, does see Goewin as possessing sovereignty traits, understanding Math placing his feet in her lap as 'simply the image of the king emerging from the womb of a woman', his royal authority thus stemming directly from his female sovereign ancestors. However, it is perhaps prudent to bear in mind Philip O'Leary's condemnation of Markale's work as of dubious value owing to his 'questionable theorizing and undue dogmatism': 'The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature', *Ériu*, 38 (1987), 27–44 (p. 28). ¹⁷Sessle, 'Exploring the Limitations of the Sovereignty Goddess', p. 12. ¹⁸*Wuthering Heights*, edited by L. H. Peterson (Boston, 1992), p. 293. ¹⁹Catherine A. McKenna, 'The Theme of Sovereignty in *Pwyll*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 29 (1980–82), 35–52 (p. 35). ²⁰See Valente, 'Merched y Mabinogi', and 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in *Math*', *BBCS*, 35 (1988), 1–9.

However, she also places great emphasis on the equality of women; she believes that the women should be regarded as correspondent protagonists, that gender is not important in the various characterizations, and that as instigators of action the women are more heroes than heroines:

Yet I would not call them 'heroes' any more than I would term them 'heroines' since their strengths and weaknesses are a result of individual character traits rather than stereotypical actions consistent with their respective genders.²¹

This seems to ignore both the frequency with which the women exploit their gender and the gradual degeneration of the women's independence as they progress through the various life-stages, two necessarily female traits that are far from characteristic of just one individual and which surely demand that the women collectively be given a feminine noun. Furthermore, while Valente lumps both men and women together in a nameless category of protagonists, the question of why the women are more memorable than their male counterparts must be asked once again. Although Valente does see a certain irony in some of the women's speeches, she does not investigate it, nor recognize its scope or implications. Moreover, she records that the women are 'not overly polite in deference to masculine characters and their bluntness hints at confident independence despite physical and legal imitations'.²² However, as suggested above, and as will be shown in greater depth, the women often use far more sophisticated and manipulative methods of getting their own way that are also not without ironic deference. While Valente shows great insight in respect of the thematic and structural use of women in *The Four Branches*, therefore, she leaves room for further discussion.

It is impossible to examine the role of women in *The Four Branches* without mentioning the work of Andrew Breeze, who has seen the preoccupation with motherhood and the way in which women sometimes treat their men as inferiors as indicative of female authorship.²³ An investigation into the nature of the women's independence, particularly in each life-stage, will inevitably shed light on this claim, and any resulting illumination will be discussed in the conclusion.

Finally, this article is based on a close reading of the text, a method that has been criticized by Mac Cana, who believes that critics such as Bollard search and find 'conscious nuances even where these do not exist; this is one of the prevailing hazards of pre-modern literary

²¹'Merched y Mabinogi', p. 10. ²²*ibid.*, p. 101. ²³Andrew Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 74–75. I am very grateful to Dr Breeze for making available his fuller typescript, 'Did a Woman Write the Four Branches of The Mabinogi?'.

study'.²⁴ While caution is of course necessary, it seems profitable to place trust in what Mac Cana himself terms the author's 'overriding restraint and discipline'²⁵ and to follow the ideology of Brynley F. Roberts:

What allows us to seek out with confidence the deeper significance of episodes in *The Four Branches* is the author's very precise use of words so that we may be sure that every word in these dialogues or scenes has been chosen because the author has seen his characters' innermost thoughts and intentions so clearly.²⁶

SINGLE WOMEN

Discounting the cursory appearance of Branwen before her betrothal to Matholwch, Goewin, Aranrhod, and Rhiannon are the only single women in *The Four Branches*, and all three display a striking forthrightness that is not perceptible in the women in other prose tales. Rhiannon's embodiment of the powerful Otherworldly woman is anticipated from her entrance as Pwyll goes to sit on the magical Gorsedd Arberth, where a man of royal blood would either receive 'kymriw neu archolleu, neu ynteu a welei ryweddawt' ('an injury or wounds, or he would see a wonder').²⁷ Both possibilities are inevitably linked because of their unseen source, with the result that Rhiannon carries an ambiguous significance: the paradoxical speed of her horse makes her a wonder, but metaphorically she also embodies the first possibility, since Pwyll is the smitten recipient of her scathing wit.

Unlike any other female character in *The Four Branches*, Rhiannon is not first presented as lady of court nor as wife; she enters into the established worldly setting as if through a portal from the Otherworld, 'ar uarch canwelw mawr aruchel' ('upon a tall, great pale-white horse').²⁸ Immediately she is a *marchoges*,²⁹ 'horsemaster', and, although this is certainly a vestige of the myth, she is the only woman in *The Four Branches* to be seen in an activity otherwise undertaken only by men. Similarly, in the Third Branch she can be seen participating physically in the hunting, apparently leaving Cigfa at home alone, as Manawydan reminisces: 'Nit oed dim digriuwach gantaw no gwelet Arberth a'r tirogaeth y buassei yn hela, ef a Pryderi, a Riannon gyt ac wynt' ('There was nothing more pleasant to him than to see Arberth and the territory he had hunted, he and Pryderi, and Rhiannon together with them').³⁰ Such prowess is presumably what makes the claims of the chamberwomen convincing to the rest of the court when they attempt to cover up the abduction of Rhiannon's child by laying the blame on her: 'Nyt oes ohonam ni namyn cleisseu

²⁴*The Mabinogi*, p. 53. ²⁵*ibid.*, p. 45. ²⁶Brynley F. Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature* (Lampeter, 1992), pp. 109–10. ²⁷*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 9. ²⁸*ibid.*, p. 9. ²⁹*ibid.*, p. 9. ³⁰*ibid.*, p. 58.

a dyrnodedu yn ymdaraw a thi; a diamheu yw gennym na welsam eirot uilwraeth yn un wreic kymeint ac ynot ti' ('We are nothing except bruises and blows from struggling with you; and we are certain that we have never seen such great strength in a single woman as there is in you').³¹

Within the patriarchal society, strength is regarded as a negative trait in a woman since it necessarily threatens gender definitions: as Stiller notes, 'physical prowess, . . . considered a male or "masculine" characteristic within the culture, tends to endanger the sexual identity of a woman'.³² This helps to explain the impatience of the men of Dyfed concerning Rhiannon's failure to produce an heir, and Pwyll's surprise at their intolerance: "'Ie," heb y Pwyll, "nyt hir ettwa yd ym y gyt, a llawer damwein a digawn bot"' ('"Well", said Pwyll, "we have not been together long yet, and many an event may occur?").³³ It may be recalled that in the other prose tales the only women to display physical strength are war-mongering hags and the wife of Custenhin in *Culhwch and Olwen*, who is clearly intended to be a comic figure as she well-meaningly threatens to crush to death Arthur's splendid band of warriors before their adventure can begin.³⁴

It is further interesting to compare the nature of Rhiannon's punishment with that of Branwen: while the latter was forced to bake for the court (a humiliation appropriate to her gender although not her rank), Rhiannon had to offer to carry guests to the court on her back. While this punishment is passive in that she must act as a beast of burden, it is indisputably a strenuous activity which—although few took her up on her offer—must have been within her capabilities.

More widely celebrated as a manifestation of her independence is Rhiannon's courtship of Pwyll. Davies sees her turning upside-down medieval social conventions regarding marriage:

As a rule, the girl would play a passive role—she would normally be given to a husband by the male members of her kin. . . . Here Rhiannon takes on the male role; she chooses Pwyll and organises the marriage feast herself.³⁵

However, this idea of Rhiannon 'fighting against contemporary social order'³⁶ is not strictly accurate. While Rhiannon is evidently aware of the inequalities of contemporary society, she has not embarked on a struggle *against* it so much as *within* it. This is a crucial distinction

³¹*ibid.*, p. 20. The *cleisseu* and *dyrnodedu* echo the Gorsedd Arberth's *kymriw* and *archolheu*. ³²N. Stiller, *Eve's Orphans: Mothers and Daughters in Medieval English Literature* (Westport, 1980), p. 9. ³³*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 19. ³⁴*Culhwch and Olwen*, edited by Bromwich and Evans, lines 458–66. ³⁵Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 67. ³⁶*ibid.*, p. 76.

since unlike Aranrhod, who refuses to accept social patterns, Rhiannon seeks to improve her lot by working *with* the system. Thus Rhiannon does not flee from the obligation to marry but simply chooses a type of man to suit her best.³⁷ Roberts notes of her second husband, 'For most of the story, Manawydan is a retiring, conciliatory figure, closely resembling Rhiannon's husband in the first branch'.³⁸ Pryderi is doubtless aware of this and has heard of Manawydan's reputation as one of the Three Ungrasping Chieftains:³⁹ he 'gives' his mother on the assumption that she will approve of being given. That Pryderi has correctly vetted Manawydan as a good partner for Rhiannon becomes clear when they meet; as Valente has recorded, Manawydan approves of her speech before her looks.⁴⁰ Consequently it is not marriage so much as motherhood that adversely affects Rhiannon, as will be suggested below.

The insight that Rhiannon has into the subordinate role of women in society, and her understanding of the need to conform to it, mean that her interaction with Pwyll drips with irony, and her frustration is palpable. For example, 'clearly Rhiannon has *engineered* her meeting with Pwyll', as Byfield notes,⁴¹ but she has engineered it in such a way that it is Pwyll who is ostensibly doing the pursuing, to the extent that he must give chase on horseback. Her initial sharpness with him is thus understandable, since by the time he finally works out a way to halt her on the third day she is lacking patience and questioning her own judgment. She omits to address him as *arglwyd* at first, and when she relates her fate of being given to another man against her will she tells Pwyll: 'Ac nys mynnaf etwa, onyt ti a'm gwrthyt' ('And I still do not want him, unless you refuse me').⁴² The use of *etwa*, 'still, even now', can only have been provoked by Pwyll's pathetic performance in attempting to stop her—as if in her own mind she had been debating whether perhaps Gwawl would after all make the more tolerable husband.

The battle between Rhiannon's impatience about her situation and her knowledge that she must resign herself to her role is again highlighted at her wedding feast, where she attempts to be passive on the entrance of Gwawl. Valente notes: 'It is fair to assume that Rhiannon is well aware of this red-haired visitor's identity' even though Pwyll is excusably ignorant here; this raises the question in

³⁷Despite her Otherworldly status, Rhiannon is clearly subject to the same social expectation as mortal women with regard to marriage, and the implication in the First Branch is that in order to break off her betrothal to Gwawl she must find an alternative husband. ³⁸Introduction to the Third Branch, *The Mabinogi*, translated by Ford, p. 74. ³⁹*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 49. ⁴⁰'Merched y Mabinogi', pp. 225–26. ⁴¹Catherine E. Byfield, 'Character and Conflict in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *BBCS*, 40 (1993), 51–72 (p. 53); my italics. ⁴²*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 12.

our minds as to her silence'.⁴³ Rhiannon is allowing Pwyll the opportunity to prove himself by asserting his dominance, as she understands that it is not a wife's place to take control. When Pwyll fails dismally her reaction is brusque, her patience with him tested yet again as she takes over the situation: "Taw, hyt y mynnych," heb y Riannon, "ny bu uuscrellach gwr ar y ssynnwyr e hun nog ry uuost ti" ("Be silent, as long as you wish", said Rhiannon, "never was a man more stupid with his intelligence than you have been").⁴⁴

Mac Cana asserts that Rhiannon 'oversways her lord and her suitor and imprints her conscious dominance on all her converse with them',⁴⁵ and indeed her manipulation can be seen extending to Gwawl, whom she confidently tells Pwyll she will cause to rise and trample down his sack of food at the wedding feast. This she does, commanding rather than persuading, and, as Byfield notes she did with Pwyll,⁴⁶ exploiting the address: "A geimat," heb y Rhiannon, "kyuot y uynydd ar uyr," wrth Gwawl uab Clut ("Champion", said Rhiannon to Gwawl son of Clud, "arise quickly").⁴⁷ *Keimat*, 'champion, hero', leaves Gwawl no option but to rise proudly.

Such orchestration gives Rhiannon a thinly veiled independence, and our knowledge that she can manage a situation far more capably than the men makes her an electric character: by portraying her as so consciously humouring the blundering patriarchal society the author gives the impression that her patience may fracture at any moment. This threat is illustrated following the capture of Gwawl, as the men deferentially pass the responsibility of deciding his fate to each other—Pwyll asks Hefeydd for his advice on the matter, whereupon it is Rhiannon who breaks in: 'Llyna dy gynghor di' ('Here is your counsel').⁴⁸ Such characterization can only be conscious, but this notion will be explored further below. The limitations of Rhiannon's independence must meanwhile be remembered: she works in harmony—if painfully so—with patriarchal society, actively seeking a husband. When she does run up against serious opposition (though not as a single woman) it comes not in the form of a man but as a group of women able to scheme and plot for their own interests as well as she can.

As the virgin footholder of Math, Goewin has the power of life or death over the ruler of Gwynedd, since he cannot survive unless his feet are in the folds of a maiden's lap during peacetime. Math is thus entirely dependent upon Goewin, to the extent that he must delegate his kingly duty to circuit the land to his nephews so as to remain at Caer Dathyl. While her empowerment might nevertheless be seen as passive in its nature, Goewin (literally 'daring, bold') proves herself

⁴³'Merched y Mabinogi', p. 158. ⁴⁴*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 14. ⁴⁵*The Mabinogi*, p. 56.

⁴⁶'Character and Conflict', p. 54. ⁴⁷*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 16. ⁴⁸*ibid.*, p. 17.

entirely unwilling to accept the chattel-like treatment she receives from Gwydion and Gilfaethwy:

'Kyrch, Arglwyd, a doeth am uym penni, a hynny yn diargel, ac ny buum distaw inheu. Ny bu yn y llys nys guypei. Sef a doeth, dy nyeint ueibon dy chwaer, Arglwyd, Gwydyon uab Don a Giluathwy uab Don. A threis arnaf a orugant a chywilyd y titheu, a chyscu a wnaethpwynt genhyf, a hynny i'th ystauell ac i'th wely.'⁴⁹

'An attack, Lord, came upon me, and that openly, and I for my part was not silent. There was no one in the court who did not know of it. Namely, your nephews came, the sons of your sister, Lord, Gwydion son of Dôn and Gilfaethwy son of Dôn. And they raped me and brought shame to you yourself, and I was slept with, and that in your room and in your bed.'

Like Rhiannon, Goewin is a mistress of words, artfully manipulating Math's reception of the news. Her report takes the form of a formal identification, as Valente has noted, and she uses the full names of the brothers.⁵⁰ Having stressed that her violation was indeed as she says, since she clearly vocalized her dissent, she then emphasizes the relationship between Math and her assaulters, portraying the rape as a breach of kinship ethics. The special relationship between an uncle and his sister's sons is well documented in Celtic and Germanic literature. In Old English it may be witnessed as a forceful bond in *The Battle of Maldon*, where Wulfmæ is *swuster sunu* 'sister's son', to Byrhtnoth,⁵¹ and in *Beowulf*, in which the hero's lord is also his mother's brother; elsewhere in *The Four Branches* it goes some way to explaining the extraordinary relationship between Gwydion and Lleu, as well as bestowing even greater horror upon Efnisien's act of hurling his nephew Gwern into the fire. Goewin consequently stresses the betrayal of this bond in her rape, emphasizing that the dishonour was Math's also, as well as being potentially life-threatening to him. Her repetition of 'your chamber and your bed' further serves to highlight his nephews' disrespect. As a result of her skilful discourse, Math, in addition to punishing the perpetrators, is prompted into marrying her in compensation and even giving her authority over the realm.⁵²

Although Goewin's femininity makes her a victim of male violence, she nevertheless triumphs (at least ostensibly, for we do not hear of her again after her marriage) by utilizing another aspect of this femininity, her ability to manipulate speech. It should, however, be

⁴⁹*ibid.*, p. 74. ⁵⁰'Merched y Mabinogi', p. 249. ⁵¹*The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, edited by E. V. K. Dobbie (New York, 1942), p. 10, line 115. ⁵²*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 74: 'Mi a'th gymeraf yn wreic im, ac a rodaf uedyant uyg kyuoeth i'th law ditheu' ('I will take you as my wife, and I will give the control of my realm into your hand').

remembered that Goewin, like Rhiannon, exerts her independence only within the patriarchal system and that her victory is seen as her alliance with a man in marriage.

Aranrhod perhaps best lays claim to being the most independent woman in *The Four Branches*, in both behaviour and status. As Valente has noted, 'not only does she defend herself with quick wit and words but she lives independently of male protection, the *domina* of her own retreat, *Caer Aranrhod*'.⁵³

Aranrhod is physically detached from the action of the Fourth Branch until she is sent for. *Caer Aranrhod*, which Gruffydd identifies as a submerged rock off the west coast of Arfon, is situated a considerable distance from Math's court at *Caer Dathyl*, some miles north up the coast beneath Anglesey.⁵⁴ The distance is at least troublesome enough for Gwydion, attempting to provide Lleu with a social identity, to move his base from *Caer Dathyl* to *Dinas Dinlleu*. The journey of the pair to *Caer Aranrhod* is described each day—and indeed their method alternates as they come first by walking, then by sailing, and then on horseback—which reinforces the detachment of Aranrhod's abode: the initial task that confronts Gwydion is to travel to where his sister may be.

Within her fortress, Aranrhod takes on the role of the lord, welcoming, greeting, and banqueting her visitors and having command over unseen retainers or serving-men who approach the shoemakers' ship in the harbour to discover the strangers' purpose, just as Brân's men go to Matholwch's fleet in the Second Branch. She is further seen taking on a certain responsibility for the people of the cantref, chastising Gwydion for his faked attack, with the complaint that many a lad might have lost his life in the muster brought about.

Although she lives on her island off the coast, Math as ruler of Gwynedd is still theoretically her lord and she comes to him when he summons her. However, she does not appear to be answerable to him in the usual way: following the birth of her two sons, Math would technically be due the *amobr*, especially since she makes no claim of rape, the only circumstance in the law by which the lord forgoes this payment.⁵⁵ Similarly, although Gwydion goes to Math to 'cwynaw yn luttaw yn y byt rac Aranrot' ('to complain most earnestly in the world about Aranrhod')⁵⁶ that she is denying her maternal responsibilities, Math does not appear to take any action against her, rather attempting to solve Lleu's lack of a wife by means of magic. Aranrhod

⁵³Valente, 'Merched y Mabinogi', pp. 259–60. ⁵⁴W. J. Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy: An Inquiry into the Origins and Development of the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1928), p. 188. See also J. Gantz's map, 'The Wales of The Mabinogion', in his translation of *The Mabinogion* (Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 40–41. ⁵⁵*The Law of Hywel Dda*, edited and translated by Dafydd Jenkins (Llandysul, 1986), p. 55. ⁵⁶*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 83.

thus contrasts with Rhiannon, who does not evade punishment, and, perhaps as a result of her isolation, she is able to function to a great extent independently of the law.

Aranrhod is not without limitations to her power, however, due to woman's innate vulnerability in the face of physical attack: when she believes the fortress to be under assault she is greatly perturbed, asking the advice of travelling storytellers and then helping to arm them herself in her eagerness for their aid in the fight. Nevertheless, this weakness apart, Aranrhod displays great independence, particularly in her attitude to motherhood, as will be discussed below. She is, furthermore, unique in flouting social convention altogether, since Goewin and Rhiannon exert their independence only from within the system, necessarily accepting the male view of the woman's role in order to use it effectively to improve their own lot.

MARRIED WOMEN

The discrepancy in the individuality of married women by comparison with their unwedded counterparts is immediately obvious: three women are introduced into the tales who are already married; none of the three are given names but are simply referred to as the wives of, respectively, Arawn, Teyrnnon, and Llwyd.

The wife of Arawn, king of Annwn, the first woman to appear in *The Four Branches*, is introduced despite her Otherworldly status in a deal between two men: in order to free his realm from the counter-claims of Hafgan, Arawn is prepared to send Pwyll to fight his enemy in his place, granting to him in part-reward 'y wreic deccaf a weleist eiroet y gyscu gyt a thi beunoeth' ('the fairest woman you have ever seen to sleep together with you nightly').⁵⁷ At once we are presented with the image of wife as decorative chattel—she is neither named nor given the title queen.

The gynocentricity of the episode is of course dictated by the plot, but within it the queen does little herself to refute the impression of her given by Arawn: she shows herself the passive partner, able neither to initiate conversation and affection with the man she believes to be her husband when he turns his back on her, nor apparently even to broach the subject of his chastity for a whole year despite the 'tirionwch ac ymdidan hygar' ('tenderness and kindly conversation')⁵⁸ between them during the day, and despite the fact that his abstinence would be reasonable grounds on which to separate from him.⁵⁹ On the return of the real Arawn the queen does not gratefully accept his change of heart instantaneously and requires

⁵⁷*ibid.*, p. 3. ⁵⁸*ibid.*, p. 5. ⁵⁹'The "Iorwerth" Text', edited and translated by T. M. Charles-Edwards, in *The Welsh Law of Women*, edited by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff, 1980), pp. 161–79 (p. 164).

appeasement: Arawn calls her *arglwydes*, 'lady', while she addresses him without title. However, this show of justified indignation is quickly over and there is no angry reaction upon discovering that she has been bartered by her husband: she appears to accept her role.

There is nevertheless a difference between Arawn's description of his wife and her virtues as seen from the viewpoint of Pwyll, who appraises them with a fresh eye: she is beautiful, but furthermore 'o'r a welsei eiryoet wrth ymdidan a hi, dissymlaf gwreic a bonedigeidaf i hannwyt a'y hymdidan oed' ('of those he had ever seen to converse with, she was the most noble woman and the most gracious in her nature and her conversation').⁶⁰ This discrepancy is reinforced through the narrative: with Pwyll she is the *brenhines*, 'queen', with Arawn she is only ever *gwreic*, 'wife, woman'. It is surely the nature of the two relationships that colours the men's appraisals. Arawn, although clearly still regarding his wife as exceptional, can no longer see her virtues as distinct from each other; Pwyll, as a single man judging her for the first time, is able to perceive her individual qualities. While the primary function of this distinction is to build up the gravity of the temptation—and then Pwyll's chastity, it necessarily implies an authorial awareness of how the married woman, if loved, is no longer appreciated for her distinctive traits.

However, while it might equally be tempting to champion Pwyll as refusing to see Arawn's wife as a chattel and treating her accordingly, citing his obvious respect for Rhiannon in corroboration, realistically it is on account of his respect for Arawn that he denies himself. Arawn receives the news of his friend's chastity with an awed silence, which would suggest that he would not have been so honourable in Pwyll's place—nor perhaps if Pwyll had left him an equally enchanting queen in Dyfed. The role of a wife in his eyes is thus clearly expounded. Although Arawn's wife is the focal point of the episode, therefore, the gynocentricity is more about the weakness of men than the power of women, particularly as Arawn's wife fails to communicate her 'willing ardor'.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the unmarried man's appraisal of her virtues and the description of her silent confusion upon the return of her husband's affections seem to display a certain authorial sympathy.

Llwyd's wife is perhaps more naturally paired with the wife of Arawn than with the wife of Teyrnon. Once again, she finds herself as a chattel being bartered and haggled over, and while Llwyd's intention in his various manifestations is to save her life, he seems more immediately concerned with stopping Manawydan handling (*ymodi, teimlaw*)⁶² his wife, which does little to combat the image of

wife as chattel. This is perhaps why Manawydan realises that the mouse in his hand is in fact a woman before her true identity is revealed to him: having referred to the mouse as *ef*, 'it', to the first two petitioners, during his conversation with the bishop he tells him, 'lleidyr uu hi arnaf i' ('a thief has *she* been from me').⁶³ Although we are told that she and the ladies of the court had requested that they go as mice to destroy Manawydan's crop, as a wife and mother-to-be in the story, Llwyd's wife is given no direct voice.

Teyrnon's wife is in the unusual position of having virtual equality with her husband in their marriage. She is not treated as a chattel and their life together is very much a joint venture: Teyrnon complains to his wife that they are careless in losing the offspring of 'yn cassec' ('our mare'),⁶⁴ and when Teyrnon relates his story to the court of how the boy was found and nurtured he does not omit to give his wife credit: 'Sef ymdidan a uu gan Teirnon . . . megys y buassei y mab ar y hardelw wy, Teirnon a'e wreic, ac y megysynt' ('This was Teyrnon's conversation . . . how the boy had been in their charge, Teyrnon and his wife, and how they had reared him').⁶⁵ Similarly, when Pwyll thanks him for the return of his son, addressing him with the singular *ti*, Teyrnon is quick to remind him of his wife's participation in the rearing of the boy.⁶⁶

Teyrnon's wife can twice be seen taking the initiative, first in her plan to take some women into her confidence and pretend that she has been pregnant, and secondly when she wishes to give to Gwri the colt found on the same day as he was. However, the sphere in which she moves is greatly restricted in comparison with that of the single women: her preoccupations revolve around fulfilling the role dictated for her by society. Despite the actual equality of Teyrnon's wife in her marriage, there is no corresponding flexibility in her speech and she conforms to the deferential wife in this respect. Charles-Edwards writes that 'normally they are quite informal to each other',⁶⁷ thus seemingly ignoring the fact that while Teyrnon calls his wife *arglwydes* once, she addresses him as *arglwyd* no less than seven times. Similarly, when she does take the initiative, she must first go through the correct form, adding phrases like 'bei mynnut ti', 'if you would wish', to her suggestions.⁶⁸ When she wishes Gwri to have the colt, she phrases her request carefully: '“Ponyt oed da iti, Arglwyd,” heb hi, “peri y hyweddu, a'y rodi y'r mab”' ('“Would it not be well with you, Lord”, she said, “to have it broken in, and to give it to the boy”').⁶⁹ This is the same trick that Rhiannon adopts,

⁶⁰*ibid.*, p. 63; my italics. *Llygoden*, 'mouse', is of course a feminine noun, but up to this point the creature is nevertheless consistently referred to in this episode as masculine. ⁶¹*ibid.*, p. 22. ⁶²*ibid.*, pp. 25–26. ⁶³*ibid.*, p. 26. ⁶⁴T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Honour and Status in Some Irish and Welsh Prose Tales', *Ériu*, 29 (1978), 123–41 (p. 129). ⁶⁵*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 23. ⁶⁶*ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶⁰*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 4. ⁶¹Valente, 'Merched y Mabinogi', p. 145. ⁶²*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 62.

the woman twisting her words so that it appears to be the man's enterprise. However, Teyrnnon is clearly used to such parlance, understands it as a statement of his wife's wish, and swiftly replies 'Mi a adaf y ti y rodi idaw' ('I will allow you to give it to him').⁷⁰ Convention nevertheless remains, despite their enlightened relationship: it is a question of *letting* his wife give something, in accordance with the laws which state that an *uchelwr*'s wife may only give certain household objects.⁷¹

A word must be said about the occasional interpretation of Teyrnnon's wife as mercenary bourgeois, not least because it would imply a further level of initiative. Roberts notes that Teyrnnon's wife takes on Gwri only after assuring herself of the child's aristocratic origins, and that she agrees he must be returned to Pwyll 'but cynical to the end, sees some benefit for herself in the possible social arrangements which may ensue'.⁷² Valente holds a similar—if less damning—view: 'Teyrnnon speaks from the heart and his wife speaks from the head'.⁷³ However, such a reading is not entirely watertight. Teyrnnon speaks from the head: although he 'eagerly "adopts" the foundling',⁷⁴ he does so knowing that it will be a joy to his childless wife, and is thus obviously aware of the social stigma of being barren.⁷⁵ Similarly, he is doubtless partly motivated by material gain when he tells his wife that they are *llibin*, 'neglectful', for allowing the colts of such a fine mare to disappear year after year.⁷⁶ Teyrnnon's wife also speaks from the heart in her desire to give Gwri the colt and in her agreement to take him back to his real parents: her list of how she and her husband may gain starts with an *a*, 'and', and is clearly an *additional* reason for his return, not the main one.⁷⁷

Teyrnnon's wife certainly checks Gwri's nobility before taking him in, but it is perhaps anachronistic to apply modern ideology of political correctness here. It is important to remember that Teyrnnon's wife is planning not to adopt or foster, but to pretend that the child is her own, and because of their social standing—Teyrnnon is lord of Gwent Is-Coed—it seems sensible to establish that their new son and heir should be deserving of such honour. The second indictment comes when she tells Teyrnnon of the three ways in which they may gain by returning Gwri, read as a somewhat mercenary take on proceedings. However, this seems more like the rhetoric of a woman grown fond of her 'son', about to become barren once again and have her faked pregnancy exposed, attempting to be positive and looking for some compensatory good in their loss.

⁷⁰*ibid.*, p. 24. ⁷¹'The "Iorwerth" Text', edited by Charles-Edwards, p. 172. ⁷²*Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 109. ⁷³'Merched y Mabinogi', p. 176. ⁷⁴Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 109. ⁷⁵See Morfydd E. Owen, 'Shame and Reparation: Woman's Place in the Kin', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, edited by Jenkins and Owen, pp. 40–68 (p. 60). ⁷⁶*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 22. ⁷⁷*ibid.*, p. 24.

That this is the case would appear to be supported by Teyrnnon's behaviour at Pwyll's court. First he tells Pwyll, 'y wreic a'e magwys ef, nyt oes yn y byt dyn uwy y galar no' hi yn y ol' ('[as for] the woman who has raised him, there is no one in the world of greater sorrow than she at his loss').⁷⁸ Secondly, although offered jewels, horses, and dogs, Teyrnnon returns home having accepted nothing. The only conclusions that may be drawn from this are that either Teyrnnon's wife is truly grieving over her loss and is not at all on the look-out for financial reward, or that Teyrnnon has entirely failed to understand his wife's mercenary nature. But, as we have seen above, Teyrnnon, the 'good and courteous husband',⁷⁹ has a keen appreciation of his wife's thinking, and the latter conclusion is consequently not a viable one. Teyrnnon's wife must be understood simply as a wife, eager to fulfil social expectations of her, if able to take some initiative within these constraints.

There are other married women in *The Four Branches*, but the nature of their positions requires them to be considered as something more than a wife: Cymidei Cymeinfol functions primarily as a mother; Branwen, Cigfa, and Goewin as estranged wives.

ESTRANGED WIVES

It is interesting to observe that in the same way that independent women lose this trait upon marriage (or motherhood), so periods of estrangement provoke previously passive women into activity. Branwen is little but a name at the start of the Second Branch, and while there are lengthy descriptions of the feasts at which she is present and of the conversation between her brother and her husband, Branwen is indeed no more than a presence. Although legally entitled to accept or refuse betrothal,⁸⁰ she does not voice her opinion: we can only assume acquiescence. Byfield has recorded the use of hearsay in our initial introduction to her, noting that we have only the fleeting 'second-hand descriptions of Efnisien and Matholwch:

By presenting Branwen in this way, the author has distanced her from the forefront of the action; she is not yet a 'character', but an object of negotiation and exchange between Bendigeidfran and Matholwch.⁸¹

As the new queen of Ireland we hear of her presenting jewels to her subjects, but this is no more than royal duty requires of her: Rhiannon

⁷⁸*ibid.*, p. 26. ⁷⁹Valente, 'Merched y Mabinogi', p. 176. ⁸⁰D. B. Walters, 'The European Legal Context of the Welsh Law of Matrimonial Property', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, edited by Jenkins and Owen, pp. 115–31 (p. 122), and Andrew Welsh, 'Branwen, Beowulf, and the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale', *Viator*, 22 (1991), 1–13 (pp. 6–7). ⁸¹'Character and Conflict', p. 57.

performs the same ceremony upon her arrival in Dyfed. Up to this point, it is difficult not to agree with Mac Cana's damning character assassination of Branwen as 'a flaccid, colourless creation'.⁸² The excellence attributed to her by both Matholwch and Efnisien is thus confusing, unless it is exactly this passivity that makes her shine in their eyes. It is only when driven from her husband's chamber into the kitchens of the court and as a victim of male violence suffering the butcher's blows that Branwen takes on a tangible character: her spirit does not allow her to suffer the humiliation, and her ingenuity manifests itself as she teaches a starling words and sends it to Wales with a letter for Brân relating her misfortune. Another trait concealed before the sudden change in status is her wisdom. It is to Branwen that Matholwch immediately (and fruitfully) refers his messengers to ask about the strange sight approaching from the sea: 'Nyt oes neb yma a wypo dim y wrth hynny, onys gwyr Branwen. Gouynnwch idi' ('There is no one here who may know anything about that, unless Branwen knows about it. Ask her').⁸³ Although Matholwch may think of Branwen as a likely expounder of an apparition coming from Britain, the seeking of her counsel on any account clashes with the image of opinionless maiden and wife first presented. Similarly, following the British invasion her peace-weaving completely changes in its nature, from passive bridehood, from simply being Ford's 'pawn to secure an alliance',⁸⁴ to active negotiation over the critical peace-treaty: 'Sef a gauas yn y gynghor, kymryt hynny; a thrwy gynghor Branuen uu hynny oll, ac rac llygru y wlat oed genti hitheu hynny' ('This is what he decided in his council—to accept that [offer], and that was entirely through the counsel of Branwen, and that was her counsel in order to prevent the ruination of the land').⁸⁵

While she is not prepared to suffer injustice, Branwen remains acutely aware of her role and its political importance. It is this perception and integrity that lead her to rebuff the misplaced obsequiousness of the messengers who address her—a cook—as *arglwydes*, and that eventually lead to her death: "Oy a uab Duw," heb hi, "guae ui o'm ganedigaeith. Da a dwy ynys a diffeithwyt o'm achaws i." A dodi ucheneit uawr, a thorri y chalon ar hynny' ("Alas son of God", she said, "woe is me for my birth. Two good islands have been destroyed on my account." And she gave a great sigh, and her heart broke because of that').⁸⁶

Although her influence has its limitations—her femininity renders physical retaliation impossible and her compassion leaves her unable

to cope with failure in the responsibility of her peace-weaving role—Branwen becomes more actively involved in political events than any other woman in *The Four Branches*, despite her unpromising introduction.

A similar transformation—or perhaps revelation—may be observed in the case of Cigfa, the wife of Pryderi. Until the disappearance of her husband she has neither definable personality nor voice; indeed, even when Manawydan returns alone, it is Pryderi's mother, Rhiannon, rather than the shadowy figure of his wife, who articulates her distress and goes in search of him. However, with the disappearance of Rhiannon—and with her hope that Pryderi is safe—Cigfa is suddenly able to communicate. Mac Cana expresses admiration that Manawydan does not 'show resentment when Cigfa . . . waxed melodramatic about the danger to her virtue in being left alone with him',⁸⁷ but there would seem to be good reason for Manawydan to take pity rather than umbrage: Cigfa is artfully manipulating his response, just as Rhiannon and Goewin were able to do with the men around them. Valente has argued that Cigfa's lament is not an expression of unnecessary anxiety but the preface to an important negotiation: her husband being absent, Cigfa's *nawdd*, 'protection', must now come from the lord of the land, and Manawydan is the only candidate for this title.⁸⁸ Her method of provoking Manawydan into declaring their new bond is to give him the impression that she believes herself at his mercy; faced with Cigfa's hysterical lamentation, he can only give her the utmost reassurance.

Having established their relationship, Cigfa continues to play the vulnerable woman, addressing Manawydan as *arglwyd*, as Byfield notes, 'no less than seven times',⁸⁹ and thus reminding him of his duty towards her. That this play of helplessness is conscious is clear from her initial outburst: having secured Manawydan's pledge of chastity she tells him, 'Hynny a deby(g)wn i' ('That is what I thought').⁹⁰ This concern with self-preservation may also be observed when she worries that Manawydan should take up a craft appropriate to his rank, concern which Mac Cana has labelled 'prim suburban snobbery'⁹¹ and which Byfield has seen as emphasizing 'her new perception of his honour and worth'.⁹² It seems more likely to be motivated by her perception of his new relationship with her and its corresponding responsibilities: she is understandably not keen for her lord and protector to be either shoemaker or mouse-slayer. Manawydan is of course not always so easily manipulated, but the paradigm of the passive married woman suddenly able to exert

⁸²*The Mabinogi*, p. 57. ⁸³*Pedeir Keinc*, pp. 39–40. ⁸⁴Introduction to the Second Branch, *The Mabinogi*, translated by Ford, p. 57. For a deeper investigation into Branwen as peace-weaver between the two nations see Welsh, 'Branwen, Beowulf, and the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale'. ⁸⁵*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 42. ⁸⁶*ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸⁷*The Mabinogi*, p. 47. ⁸⁸Valente, 'Merched y Mabinogi', p. 233, and 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in *Math*', p. 3. ⁸⁹'Character and Conflict', p. 64. ⁹⁰*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 57. ⁹¹*The Mabinogi*, p. 47. ⁹²'Character and Conflict', p. 63.

influence on her own fate and express her dissatisfaction with her situation is nevertheless clear.

Blodeuwedd's estrangement from her husband is more mental than physical, but once again the same pattern emerges. Manufactured as a wife for Lleu by Math and Gwydion, Blodeuwedd is given no refusal in her marriage, nor indeed a voice until Lleu is away visiting Math. She is initially portrayed as the well-endowed perfect wife—as would be expected, having been created by men for the purpose—and, like the wives of Arawn, Teyrnnon, and Llwyd, she becomes briefly nameless, simply *hi*, 'she', not receiving an identity until she is filled with love for Gronw.⁹³ Valente sees some stirring from the role of domestic woman even before Blodeuwedd first meets Gronw, when she asks the court whether it would not be improper if they failed to invite him in:

It is Blodeuwedd's ability to manipulate the rules of hospitality—as Rhiannon did with Gwawl in the First Branch—that permits her to exert some control over parts of the external world which attract her in her isolation.⁹⁴

Certainly after Gronw's arrival her character becomes delineated—and to an extent her status in this new situation is no longer 'wife' but single woman, as her forthright behaviour would seem to suggest. Blodeuwedd automatically assumes the upper hand in her relationship with Gronw and, unlike Rhiannon, does not attempt to conceal it, informing him that he may not leave her on the first two nights, until Gronw fears the imminent return of Lleu: "Te," heb hi, "auory, mi a'th *ganhadaf* di e ymdeith" ('"Well", she said, "tomorrow, I will allow you to go away"').⁹⁵

While it is Gronw who hatches the plan whereby he and Blodeuwedd may be together, it is she who so skilfully employs it, showing mock-concern for her husband's well-being, demonstrating 'a genius for deception'⁹⁶ and exploiting the position she holds by virtue of her femininity—Byfield records that she gives Lleu no title until she coaxes him into demonstrating his death, during which she calls him *arglwyd* four times.⁹⁷ Blodeuwedd also plays on her presumed naivety, having been born adult: "Arglwyd," heb hi, "llyma yr anieileit a dywedeisti uot bwch arnunt" ('"Lord", she said, "here are the animals which you said were called buck [goats]"').⁹⁸

Valente has shown the importance of speech in this episode and compares the 'swift and clear' communication between Blodeuwedd and Gronw with the circumlocutions between her and Lleu.⁹⁹

Blodeuwedd also uses her silence to provoke a response in her husband, as Arawn's wife did, except that Blodeuwedd's use of this technique is entirely conscious. Here Valente recognizes Blodeuwedd's use of convention as she gets Lleu 'to agree with the manipulation through each stage of the preparations'.¹⁰⁰ So active a part in the plot does Blodeuwedd take that Gronw actually sees her as instigator and pleads that Lleu takes into account that his behaviour was the result of a woman's wiles, 'drycstryw gwreic'—a request that Lleu does indeed yield to, though it does not save Gronw's life.

While Blodeuwedd may be perceived as amoral, there seems to be a hint of authorial sympathy in the description of her love for Gronw. The culprit in this episode is perhaps not an individual so much as the nature of Blodeuwedd's creation—Gwydion is also amoral to a great extent, happy to condone the rape of a virgin and to cause battle and death for the love of his brother, and Blodeuwedd has perhaps inherited her lack of conscience from this 'parent'. Her amorality may of course be interpreted differently—as a manifestation of her desire for independence. Trapped from birth under the marital authority of Lleu, and the patriarchal, disciplining authority of Gwydion,¹⁰¹ Blodeuwedd seizes the opportunity to have some say in her own fate. While she is finally condemned for bringing dishonour to a male character—the only woman to manage this in *The Four Branches*—in her attempt to change her destiny, she may at least be observed following the same awakening into activity as Branwen and Cigfa.

MOTHERS

The three chief mothers in *The Four Branches* may be seen undergoing a change in status upon the fulfilment of their reproductive function. Stiller writes of medieval English society that 'becoming pregnant and becoming a mother did not arouse respect or ensure power',¹⁰² and from the evidence of *The Four Branches* it would seem that motherhood adversely affects standing and influence, since the independence of the mother is directly threatened by the child.

In Rhiannon's case the impact of motherhood is particularly evident, since it follows the lively orchestration of her courtship as a spirited and forceful single woman. Although she and Pwyll begin their marriage reigning jointly, 'gwledychu y wlat a *wnaethont*' ('they ruled the land'),¹⁰³ the subjugation of Rhiannon's character by functional concerns becomes gradually obvious. When the men of Dyfed become concerned about her child-bearing ability they reduce her to a faulty—and thus replaceable—chattel.¹⁰⁴

⁹³*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 84. ⁹⁴'Merched y Mabinogi', p. 273. ⁹⁵*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 85; my italics. ⁹⁶Byfield, 'Character and Conflict', p. 69. ⁹⁷*ibid.*, p. 70. ⁹⁸*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 87. ⁹⁹'Merched y Mabinogi', p. 278.

¹⁰⁰*ibid.*, p. 278. ¹⁰¹Markale, *Women of the Celts*, p. 152. ¹⁰²*Eve's Orphans*, p. 5. ¹⁰³*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 19; my italics. ¹⁰⁴*ibid.*, p. 19.

'Arglwyd,' heb wynt, 'ni a wdom na bydy gyuoet ti a rei o wyr y wlat honn, ac yn ouyn ni yw, na byd it etiued o'r wreic yssyd gennynt. Ac wrth hynny, kymmer wreic arall y bo' ettiued yt ohonei.'

'Lord', they said, 'we know that you are not of the same age as some of the men of this land, but our fear is that you will get no heir from the woman you have. And because of that, take another wife from whom you may get an heir.'

Rhiannon is neither mentioned by name nor given the title 'queen' but is seen purely in terms of her gender role in life. When she does give birth it is Pwyll, not Rhiannon, who is described as having a child: 'mab a anet idaw ef' ('a son was born to him').¹⁰⁵ Rhiannon's role has been redefined and she is evidently of secondary importance to her child—we hear of her next in the phrase 'y mab a'y uam' ('the boy and his mother') and then as 'mam y mab, Riannon' ('the mother of the boy, Rhiannon'), the use of her name an almost awkward reminder of the identity of the mother.¹⁰⁶ Such exclusion from the nuclear family is highlighted again by Teyrnnon, who believes that he should return Gwri so that Rhiannon would no longer be punished, but also because it was wrong to keep him, 'yn gwybot y uot yn uab y wr arall' ('knowing that he was the son of another man').¹⁰⁷

Rhiannon's independence as a character returns briefly upon the disappearance of the boy, as she attempts to coerce the chamberwomen into telling the truth by promising their safety. However, the women have no faith in Rhiannon's influence at court and do not believe that they will not be punished: this in itself demonstrates how Rhiannon has fallen in power and status since becoming a wife and mother. She is no longer able to orchestrate her own fate, and furthermore, having accepted her role as wife and queen as the alternative to a life with Gwawl, she is ready to accept it: 'A gwedy bot yn degach genthi kymryt y phenyt nog ymdaeru a'r gwraged, y phenyt a gymerth' ('And after it seemed better to her to accept her penance than to quarrel with the women, she accepted her penance').¹⁰⁸ Such defeatist behaviour is of course drastically at odds with her attitude as a single woman.

Following the death of Pwyll in the Third Branch, Rhiannon does appear to regain some of her influence. She is praised by Pryderi for her speech before her looks, has her say on the proposed marriage to Manawydan (as she is entitled to do), hunts with the men, and, on the disappearance of Pryderi, takes the initiative and goes in search of him. However, while still a mother she is no longer in the same social milieu as she was in the First Branch, nor does the social

pressure to produce an heir—and then the missing heir himself—blot out her identity. In status she has really returned to being a wife and consequently acquires a slight increase in her freedom as a character. Nevertheless, she is still a shadow of her single self and, like Cigfa, is allowed no voice throughout the episode in England.

Branwen suffers from motherhood in a similar manner, although the contrast is not so blatant. We hear of her first when she is flourishing as the new queen of Ireland: 'Y ulwydyn honno a duc hi yn glotauawr, a hwyl delediwr a duc o glot a chedymdeithon' ('She spent that year in celebratory fashion, and spent a fine time in terms of fame and companions').¹⁰⁹ This is followed by her pregnancy and the birth of Gwern. It is surely no coincidence that it is after fulfilling her role as heir-bearer that she is suddenly banished from her husband's chamber, forced to bake for the court and to receive blows from the butcher. Branwen's only show of initiative as a mother is her attempt to leap into the flames after her burning son, whom Efnisien has hurled into the fire, but despite maternal instincts this action comes at a time when, like Rhiannon, she has been removed from her position in society and is in the process of being rescued by Brân: at this moment she is also an estranged wife.

Cymidei Cymeinfoll also deserves mention as a mother. She does not conform to the pattern of a wife to begin with, since she is given a name, although not a voice. After her progression to the status of mother the couple's troublemaking remains a joint venture and, strangest of all, when the family are trapped in the iron chamber by the Irish, who then attempt to intoxicate the family before burning them alive, the narrative describes how the Irish decided to 'guassan-aethu yn diwall o uwynt a llyn arnunt, ar y wreic, a'y gwr, a'y phlant' ('serve food and drink in abundance to them—to the woman, and her husband, and her children').¹¹⁰ Not only is the order unusual—Cymidei as mother placed first in the list—but the rest of the family are seen as *her* dependants. However, when she emerges from the lake, she is described as twice as big as her monstrous and evil-looking husband, and such strength, as in Rhiannon's case, threatens male gender notions: Cymidei is the first in the list because of her huge presence, therefore—but perhaps equally because of her frightening reproductive capabilities, since she appears to be able to give birth to several children a year.

Cymidei is nevertheless the exception to the mother pattern, as both Rhiannon and Branwen undergo a reduction in their independence. Llwyd's wife is meanwhile quite literally crippled by her forthcoming child: 'A phy na bei ueichawc hi, nis gordiwdut ti' ('And were she not pregnant, you would not have overtaken her').¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ibid., p. 20. ¹⁰⁶ibid., p. 20. ¹⁰⁷ibid., p. 24; my italics. ¹⁰⁸ibid., p. 21.

¹⁰⁹ibid., p. 37. ¹¹⁰ibid., p. 36; my italics. ¹¹¹ibid., p. 64.

Aranrhod's role as a mother is the most intriguing aspect of her character, but as she qualifies as a mother only technically her independence has been discussed in the section on single women. Upon the birth of her two sons, her immediate reaction is to make for the door and to leave her maternal responsibilities well behind. However, she is forced to exert enormous power as a mother, ironically through her rejection of the role. When Gwydion presents her with her son, Charles-Edwards asserts, 'her weapon is to "fix his fate" (*tynghaf tynghed*)'.¹¹² The potency of the fate she fixes is best conveyed by the Laws:

The nine months as a foetus: the sex of the child is unknown and it remains of the status of a foetus until baptized. Birth, then, is not by itself a full transition, for it continues to have the status of a foetus until it can be named. Naming entails the public recognition of the sex of the child. Since the name will normally include at least a patronymic, if not full bilateral descent, naming typically implies public recognition of the child's kinship.¹¹³

Aranrhod, apparently unaware—or at least claiming—that she was not a virgin, is either unable or unwilling to admit the name of the child's father, and in denying the child a name denies him gender and kin also. When she is foiled in this design, she seals upon him the fate that he will not bear arms, which again has vast significance for the boy because 'for the Celtic warrior, the taking of arms was one of the great "rites of passage" from one status to another in a life-cycle'.¹¹⁴

The motivation for her actions is usually assumed to be shame about the 'peculiar and humiliating manner of her giving birth'¹¹⁵ in front of Math and his retainers, yet it seems equally likely that for a woman who seeks independence as fervently as Aranrhod, who even lives detached in her own fortress, motherhood is necessarily a fate to avoid. Aranrhod seems to understand that a woman's power lies solely in her *potential* as heir-bearer and that to accept her children would be to compromise her independence and individuality, as the evidence provided by the other mothers would indeed suggest. Consequently, in order to remain a single woman she denies both that she is not a virgin and the solid proof to the contrary, Dylan and Lleu. That this is what motivates her, rather than simply shame, would seem to be supported by the fact that the 'enemy' who

attempts to force her responsibilities upon her in this situation is Gwydion, the representative—as he is in the case of Blodeuwedd—of the patriarchal society: 'Ni'th elwir bellach byth yn uorwyn' ('Never more will you be called maiden').¹¹⁶

The mothers of *The Four Branches* may thus be seen to be dramatically affected by their status. Having fulfilled their reproductive function, their independence suffers accordingly as the social focus switches from creator to creation, from the potential heir-bearer to the heir himself. Only Aranrhod, as fugitive, escapes this fate by retreating from society.

CONCLUSION

By tracing the women of *The Four Branches* through their various life-stages it becomes apparent that at any one stage there is thematic congruency between the female characters in terms of the extent of their independence. Thus, while single and estranged women demonstrate the greatest initiative and power, the married women have less influence, and mothers less still. Such a pattern reaffirms the skill of the author in his characterization, since he provides a consistent portrayal of status and its implications, revealing an ordered mind.

It is tempting to regard such a depiction of the women in their various stages as an oblique authorial comment upon the female plight, particularly in the cases where a woman straddles more than one stage. The contrast between the effects of status upon Rhiannon is massive: she is spirited and powerful as a single woman, and defeatist and briefly nameless as a wife and mother. However, the obvious objection is the possibility that the pattern is merely reflecting reality and—more importantly—following the dictates of the art of storytelling.¹¹⁷ Inevitably the author will only see Rhiannon as interesting when she is undergoing periods of danger or doubt about her fate as a single woman, and will lose interest when, as a wife and mother, she loses her capacity for adventure, having fulfilled her function. As a happily married woman, Branwen demonstrates no discernible initiative, nor does the author probe the workings of a contented mind, but as soon as she is separated from Matholwch the focus switches from him to her as she reveals her hidden capacity to act. Nevertheless, when the essence of the women's autonomy is examined, yet more evidence for a certain authorial sympathy comes to light.

The independence of the women in *The Four Branches* manifests

¹¹²T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford, 1993), p. 177. ¹¹³*ibid.*, pp. 175–76, encapsulating *Llyfr Iorwerth*. ¹¹⁴*ibid.*, p. 178. ¹¹⁵Valente, 'Merched y Mabinogi', pp. 256–57. See also J. K. Bollard, 'The Structure of The Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1974–75, pp. 250–76 (pp. 267–68).

¹¹⁶*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 79. ¹¹⁷Although, as a more historical matter, it cannot be dealt with here, it is further interesting—and helpful in determining whether the pattern is a literary device—to question whether it reflects the reality of the author's day or that of the remote past in which *The Four Branches* are set.

itself in a variety of ways, from the physical presence of Cymidei Cymeinfoll or the activity of Rhiannon to the simple self-government of Aranrhod. However, the majority of the women fall into a single group whose 'chief power emerges through words, which should come as no surprise, given the physically limited world the noble woman in medieval romances and folk literature inhabits'.¹¹⁸

What is surprising is the nature of their speeches, which are usually far from the blunt communications that Valente would have them to be.¹¹⁹ The manipulators—Rhiannon, Goewin, Cigfa, Blodeuwedd, and, to lesser effect, the wives of Teyrnnon and Arawn—all possess an acute understanding of the relationship dynamics and codes of etiquette between men and women, and are able to exploit them to great benefit. Thus Rhiannon knows how to control whilst acting the subordinate so that Pwyll may believe he has the upper hand, and Cigfa puts on a shameless display of a maiden in distress in order to secure Manawydan's pledge of friendship. Blodeuwedd poses as the adoring and subservient wife in order to extract crucial information from her husband. Goewin is meanwhile able to profit from an appreciation of the codes which exist between men in their relationships by the careful phrasing of her complaint to Math about the sons of Dôn. This capacity to orchestrate their situations by working from within the system surely accounts to a considerable extent for their memorability, especially since paradoxically it implies a certain ironic objectivity on the part of the women: in order to use the various techniques of persuasion, they must first have consciously identified their efficacy and furthermore have a clear understanding of their own role within society. Such astuteness is not displayed by any of the men. This is true even of Gwydion, whose deception of Pryderi relies mainly on magic and lies rather than on wilful persuasion, and who has far less success dealing with Math when he makes a complaint against Aranrhod than Goewin had when she made a complaint against him. These women are consequently presented as a powerful force that belies their submissive social position. Indeed, if Branwen seems colourless in comparison with other women in *The Four Branches* it is simply because she cannot be counted among the manipulators: having whole-heartedly taken on the self-sacrificial role of peace-weaver, diverging from her contemporaries' tendency to serve self-interest, she lacks the detachment necessary for the manipulation of honour codes.

Aranrhod proves a more impressive exception to the group since, like Branwen, she does not owe her memorability to rhetoric but uniquely to her rejection of a woman's inevitable progression from maiden to mother as she attempts to remain static as a single

woman—the status that, as we have seen, allows the most independence. Aranrhod is indelible as a character because she shocks us by not only abandoning her two children but by even attempting to deny Lleu any social existence. However, truly intriguing is the fact that she is not condemned outright for her behaviour. Gwydion does indeed call her a wicked woman ('direit wreic wyt'), but she in turn calls him a wicked man ('gwr drwc wyt ti'), an accusation that we know to be fair from his arrangement of Goewin's rape.¹²⁰ His condemnation of Aranrhod can thus not be taken as seriously as if Pwyll or Manawydan were making the accusation. As well as her concern for the possible loss of life in the cantref, Aranrhod is portrayed as courteous, welcoming (before her visitors reveal their identity), and of good humour, as illustrated by her reaction when the shoemaker's young apprentice hits a wren: 'Sef a wnaeth hitheu, chwerthin. "Dioer," heb hi, "ys llaw gyffes y medrws y Lleu ef"' ('This is what she did, laugh. "God knows", she said, "it is a skilful hand with which the light-one hit it"').¹²¹ Furthermore, Aranrhod does escape unpunished, apart from her shame, and Lleu, although he receives a name and arms, does ultimately fall under Aranrhod's curse that he shall not have a wife upon the transformation of Blodeuwedd.

Both Aranrhod and the group of manipulators do share, albeit in different ways, an authorial compassion that seems to suggest the conscious portrayal of their inhibiting situation. The nature of the manipulators' detached power is, after all, their author's creation, and his respect for their ability is palpable in his lively illustration of their techniques and the consistent failure of the men (Teyrnnon apart) to perceive that they are being steered. It is consequently difficult not to perceive as conscious the sharp loss of this power as the women progress through their various life-stages. The author's ambiguous portrayal of Aranrhod, neither condemning nor lauding her behaviour outright, would again seem to demonstrate an understanding of the fate of a mother. Although all authorial bias has to be read into *The Four Branches*,¹²² it seems unlikely that the author would have allowed Aranrhod to be ultimately successful in her vengeance—or to evade a grizzly end—were this ambiguity not intentional. It is perhaps too bold to see the depiction of the women as a direct authorial comment on their plight, but it may be regarded with certainty as a sympathetic reflection, the driving force behind the women's memorability.

A comparison with the women's Irish counterparts leads to a greater understanding of the nature of this memorability. The women of both cultures derived their status from their men, but in his

¹¹⁸Valente, 'Merched y Mabinogi', p. 67. ¹¹⁹*ibid.*, p. 101. ¹²⁰Pedeir Keinc, pp. 79 and 83. ¹²¹*ibid.*, p. 80. ¹²²Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 109.

survey of the Irish honour of women O'Leary has shown this to be particularly evident in the literature, drawing attention to the boasting word-battles of the wives of heroes in *Fled Bricrend* and *Serlige Con Culainn*, in which women vie for superiority through their partners' deeds:

The clearest indication that a woman's honour is seen as a function of that of her husband is the fact that the man's proof of his pre-eminence automatically validates his wife's claim to precedence. Thus when Medb grants Cú Chulainn the *curadmír*, she seems to include Emer in the award as a matter of course.¹²³

As a consequence, it is in the interests of the Irish women to spur their husbands on to valorous actions with hortatory speeches, as Emer does in *Fled Bricrend*, or by mockery, as Medb does in *Goire Conaill Chernaig i Crúachain ocus Aided Ailella ocus Conaill Chernaig*.¹²⁴ O'Leary notes that such techniques are also used by the women in Icelandic literature; for example, Thorgerður Egilsdóttir in *Laxdæla saga* provokes her sons by suggesting that to have been daughters given away in marriage would have better suited their dispositions.¹²⁵ The women thus function as shapers of men's fates, albeit ultimately for their own benefit.

The women of *The Four Branches* are also seeking to improve their own situations, but cannot be seen as anything but *incidental* shapers of men's fates; it is their own futures that concern them, and they are interested in a more immediate and mundane contentment (marital bliss, security, absence of physical violence) than their Irish counterparts in the texts cited by O'Leary, who have to be satisfied with the pre-eminence deriving from their partners' glory. Indeed, the only woman who is politically involved with men is Branwen, and her intervention in affairs is to bring about peace, not to spur on either side to martial honour.

This distinction manifests itself in the women's speeches: while the Irish men are *supposed* to detect the rhetoric of their wives' complaints (their sarcasm, for example), the Welsh men are supposed to be unaware that their wives are employing any such techniques of persuasion. The speeches of the women in *The Four Branches* are not ironic in themselves, so much as spoken from an ironic perspective within the codes of etiquette, as a means of acquiring immediate gains with the minimum of trouble. There are exceptions, of course:

¹²³'The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature', p. 29. For a Welshwoman's dependence upon a man for her status, see R. R. Davies, 'The Status of Women and the Practice of Marriage', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, edited by Jenkins and Owen, pp. 93-114 (p. 110). ¹²⁴O'Leary, 'The Honour of Women in Early Irish Literature', p. 30. ¹²⁵*ibid.*, p. 31.

Rhiannon uses some blunt sarcasm with Pwyll, and Deirdre is able 'to manipulate Naisi's sense of honour to compel him to elope with her';¹²⁶ but in general it helps to distinguish the different nature of the women's memorability: the Irish women exhort directly; the Welsh women use more underhand methods. In conclusion, therefore, it is the 'drycystryw gwreic' ('women's wiles'),¹²⁷ the self-interested manipulation of and within the system, together with a certain authorial sympathy, that make the women in *The Four Branches* more striking than their oblivious male counterparts.

In concluding the question of the women's memorability, however, we are left with one further point that cannot be ignored, owing to the scholarly attention currently focused in this direction. While this examination of the women's independence may have thrown up new evidence that could be used by the brave in the argument for female authorship, it does initially seem to refute at least one fundamental contention of this school of thought. Breeze has identified in *The Four Branches* what he sees as a preoccupation with motherhood and its symptoms—'child-bearing, wet-nursing, childlessness, fostering and the upbringing of children'—and is convinced that such matters are of 'natural interest to a woman' and 'rarely touched on by male writers'.¹²⁸ However, from the information on mothers gathered above, it seems clear that it is very much the patriarchal attitude to motherhood that is being portrayed. As we have seen, following the fulfilment of their reproductive function, the women are abandoned as characters and lose their independence as the focus moves from them to their children. Furthermore, the concern does not seem to be with offspring so much as with heirs, an inevitable symptom of tales that concentrate on the ruling classes, who require obvious successors to safeguard their dominions. Consequently, of the thirteen babies that may be counted in *The Four Branches*, all are male, including the offspring of the pregnant Irish women left in the cave and those of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy's bestial incarnation.¹²⁹ One must add to this total the unspecified number of sons born to Cymidei Cymeinfol. This reflects the laws of inheritance:

In a society where title to land depends on membership of a patrilineage

¹²⁶*ibid.*, p. 33. While Deirdre may also be regarded as an Irish shaper of her own fate, in shouldering the blame for his death she clearly perceives herself as a shaper of Naoise's fate. See Máire Herbert, 'The Universe of Male and Female: A Reading of the Deirdre Story', in *Celtic Languages and Celtic Peoples: Proceedings of the Second North American Congress of Celtic Studies*, edited by C. J. Byrne and others (Halifax, 1992), pp. 53-64 (pp. 60-61). ¹²⁷Pedeir Keinc, p. 92. ¹²⁸Medieval Welsh Literature, p. 75, and 'Did a Woman Write the Four Branches of The Mabinogi?' ¹²⁹All are also precocious, displaying premature growth, another sign that the concern is for healthy, strong heirs.

and is restricted to the male members of a four-generation agnatic group, the woman has strictly speaking no role to play other than as bearer of male offspring.¹³⁰

The interest in successors further explains the author's wariness of ambiguous situations where the legitimacy of an heir could be called into question: as Valente notes, 'the women who do not give birth are involved in triangles, in which the issues concerning one man's behaviour take precedence over fertility'.¹³¹ This also explains why such pains are taken to stress that there can be no mistake about Gwri's real identity as rightful heir of the Lord of Dyfed when he is recognized both by the court and by Teyrnon: 'Na rywelsei eiroet mab a that kyn debycket a'r mab y Pwyll Penn Annwn. Ansawd Pwyll hyspys oed gantaw ef, canys gwr uuassei idaw kynn no hynny' ('He had never seen a boy and father as similar as the boy to Pwyll Head of Annwn. The appearance of Pwyll was familiar to him, since he had been his man before that').¹³²

Finally, upon examining the maternal bonds in *The Four Branches* it becomes clear that affinities between mother and child are frequently weak, if not rejected altogether: Cymidei escapes from the flames, leaving her children behind (contrasting with Branwen, who proves the exception to the rule in motherhood also); Aranrhod rejects her children outright; Rhiannon seems more concerned with her own escape from punishment than with the loss of her son, whom she refers to as 'y mab' ('the boy'), rather than using the possessive.¹³³ This in particular is confirmed by Teyrnon's appraisal of the situation: it is Pwyll who will rejoice at Gwri's return, Rhiannon rather at the proof of her innocence.¹³⁴

Whatever the author's gender, the mothers are thus being portrayed from a male perspective. However, from what we have seen above of the subtleties involved in depicting the women's orchestration of their men, the skill—and indeed detachment—of the author is evidently sufficient for him or her to write from both a male and a female perspective, either naturally or consciously, and in any argument about authorship this skill is not to be underestimated.¹³⁵

¹³⁰R. R. Davies, 'The Status of Women', p. 107. ¹³¹'Merched y Mabinogi', p. 202, referring to Arawn's wife, Cigfa, Goewin, and Blodeuwedd. ¹³²*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 24. ¹³³*ibid.*, p. 20. ¹³⁴*ibid.*, p. 25. ¹³⁵I am indebted to Dr Oliver Padel for his invaluable suggestions during the preparation of this article, and also for his unstinting encouragement and support.