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Title of extract: **Revising Math: Kingship in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi**

Name of Author: **McKenna, C.**

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 46 (2003)**

Publisher: **CMCS**

Pages scanned: **95 - 118**

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

Name of Designated Person

authorising scanning: *E. L. Harris*

Date authorised: 15.02.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint

Revising Math: Kingship in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi

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MATH fab Mathonwy, lord of Gwynedd in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi, has received high marks for his governance from most commentators. Brynley Roberts has described him as 'magnanimous, fair and just', suggesting that these features of his character were well established in Welsh oral tradition long before the author of the Four Branches set to work.¹ Sioned Davies claims that he 'is presented as a fair and just ruler' with 'a magnanimous nature', that he is, in fact, 'presented as an ideal king',² and John Bollard refers to the 'forcefulness, wisdom and good counsel [that] enable [Math] to prevent such total destruction or even disappearance of the country which we find in the second and third branches'.³ These assessments accord considerable importance to the wisdom and balance that Math displays in punishing and then forgiving his nephews Gwydion and Gilfaethwy for the rape of his footholder Goewin, and in restoring the honour of Goewin by marrying her. If we examine Math from a slightly different perspective, however, certain deficiencies appear in this model of magnanimity and justice; we see the blemishes on the king's face.

In essays on the figures of Pwyll, as portrayed in the First Branch of the Mabinogi, and of Manawydan as represented in the Third, I

¹An earlier version of this paper was presented at the University of California Celtic Colloquium at UCLA in March 2002; I am grateful to Joseph F. Nagy and the student organizers of that conference for their kind invitation. For the quotation see Brynley F. Roberts, 'Characterization in the Four Branches', in his *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, *Welsh Studies*, 5 (Lampeter, 1992), pp. 105–13 (p. 111). In another chapter of the same volume, 'The Four Branches of the Mabinogi' (pp. 95–104), previously published in *The Craft of Fiction*, edited by Leigh A. Arrathoon (Rochester, NY, 1984), pp. 211–30, Roberts discusses Math as a representative, along with Pwyll, Brân, and Manawydan, of 'life's just and moral forces', whose salient trait is his capacity for forgiveness (pp. 100–1). ²Sioned Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi / Pedair Keinc y Mabinogi* (Llandysul, 1993), pp. 73–74. ³J. K. Bollard, 'The Role of Myth and Tradition in *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*', *CMCS*, 6 (Winter 1983), 67–86 (p. 84); reprinted in *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays*, edited by C. W. Sullivan III (New York, 1996), pp. 277–302 (p. 297).

have argued that both of these fundamentally good men are shown to have a lot to learn — that they grow into their lordship in the course of their stories.⁴ Far from being static emblems of good kingship, both Pwyll and Manawydan make errors of judgment that need to be rectified before they can be said to be fully in possession of the qualities that characterize an ideal ruler. Pwyll must temper both his arrogance and his tendency to injudiciously ostentatious magnanimity; he must learn to listen to his counsellors, but to take ultimate responsibility for the implementation of justice with respect to his calumniated wife. He changes his ways, and is rewarded with a lifelong friendship with the realm of Annwfn and its lord, and with the restoration in the end both of his son and of his wife's honour. In the Third Branch, Manawydan obtains from Pryderi, in addition to the hand of Rhiannon, *medyant* 'possession' and *mwynant* 'enjoyment' of the seven cantrefs of Dyfed. He loses it all, however: as the result of a spell cast by Llwyd fab Cil Coed, all signs of human life and culture vanish from Dyfed, and Pryderi and Rhiannon themselves disappear into the Otherworld. Before he can recover his land, his wife, and his son-in-law, Manawydan must learn to behave in accordance with his status, not only enjoying its privileges, such as hunting and feasting, but also exercising responsibility for the land. Perhaps even more important, he needs to develop a capacity for discernment and diplomacy. In this article, I will argue that Math, too, can be more appropriately read as a lord in the process of becoming what he needs to be than as one who represents ideal kingship from the outset.

W. J. Gruffydd remarked of Math that he 'is not even a secondary character' in the Fourth Branch, despite the fact that 'the commencement of the tale distinctly indicates a Math story; it has his name at its head and in its first sentences, and his very interesting *cynnedv* or peculiarity is mentioned'.⁵ Gruffydd went on to rewrite the Fourth Branch to restore Math to the place of prominence to which he appears to be entitled by virtue of having his name open the tale. John Bollard, however, has aptly observed that, in point of fact, even in the narrative as we have it 'the action of the tale centres around Math and his court. It is his need for a virgin footholder which leads to the war with Pryderi and to the birth and adventures of Dylan Eil Ton and Lleu Llaw Gyffes, i.e., the greater part of the Fourth Branch. . . . Far from being a secondary character, Math presides

⁴Catherine McKenna, 'The Theme of Sovereignty in Pwyll', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 29 (1980), 35–52, reprinted in *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays*, edited by Sullivan, pp. 303–30; eadem, 'Learning Lordship: The Education of Manawydan', in *Ildánach, Ildírech: A Festschrift for Proinsias Mac Cana*, edited by John Carey and others (Andover, MA, 1999), pp. 101–20. ⁵W. J. Gruffydd, *Math vab Mathonwy* (Cardiff, 1928), p. 50.

over the entire Fourth Branch'.⁶ In addition to arguing that Math is an imperfect king whose shortcomings, like Manawydan's, redound to the detriment of his family, his land, and his people, I will align myself with John Bollard in the view that Math indeed remains at the centre of his tale, even when it veers away from him to recount the life story of his nephew Lleu Llaw Gyffes and the suffering he endures on the way to becoming, in his turn, *arglwyd ar Wyned* 'lord of Gwynedd'.

That phrase occurs in the final sentence of the Fourth Branch,⁷ echoing its first. The Fourth Branch begins with a sentence that parallels quite closely the openings of the First and Second Branches:

Math uab Mathonwy oed arglwyd ar Wyned, a Pryderi uab Pwyll oed arglwyd ar un cantref ar ugeint yn y Deheu. Sef oed y rei hynny, seith cantref Dyuet, a seith Morgannhwc, a phedwar Kyredigawn, a thri Ystrad Tywi.⁸

Math son of Mathonwy was lord of Gwynedd, and Pryderi son of Pwyll was lord over twenty-one cantrefs in the south, namely, the seven cantrefs of Dyfed, seven of Morgannwg, four of Ceredigion, and three of Ystrad Tywi.

Compare this with the opening of the First Branch:

Pwyll Pendeuc Dyuet a oed yn arglwyd ar seith cantref Dyuet.⁹

Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, was lord over the seven cantrefs of Dyfed.

and of the Second:

Bendigeiduran uab Llŷr a oed urenhin coronawc ar yr ynys hon, ac ardyrchawc o goron Lundein.¹⁰

Bendigeidfran son of Llŷr was crowned king of this island, and was invested with the crown of London.

The opening of the Third Branch is quite different, but each of the others opens with a formula, as outlined by Sioned Davies, consisting of the name of the lord and the name of his land.¹¹ Each of these initial sentences follows the so-called abnormal order that is quite normal in the Four Branches: subject + copula + predicate +

⁶J. K. Bollard, 'The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1974–75, pp. 250–76; reprinted in *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays*, edited by Sullivan, pp. 165–96 (p. 184). ⁷*Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, edited by Ifor Williams, second edition (Cardiff, 1951), p. 92; henceforth PKM: ⁸ibid., p. 67. ⁹ibid., p. 1. ¹⁰ibid., p. 29. ¹¹*Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 39.

prepositional phrase beginning with *ar*.¹² Bendigeidfran is unique in his status — he is *brenin coronawg* ‘a crowned king’, rather than merely *arglwydd* ‘a lord’ — and that status, with its grandiose embellishment about the *coron Lundein* ‘crown of London’, situates him quite firmly in a legendary past,¹³ whereas the Welsh realms of Pwyll, Math, and Pryderi are quite plausible as medieval political entities, whatever may be said for their rulers. The opening of the Fourth Branch is distinctive for the fact that it puts two *arglwyddau* into play: Math in the north and Pryderi in the south. Otherwise, the three openings are very similar.

Davies points out that the opening formula also contains ‘the location of the lord at that particular time’ and notes that ‘before the last element there is a “time” phrase which focuses the attention on a particular event’.¹⁴ Thus, in the First Branch we have:

A threigylgweith yd oed yn Arberth, prif lys idaw . . .¹⁵

And once upon a time he was in Arberth, a principal court of his . . .

In the Second:

A frynhawngueith yd oed yn Harlech yn Ardudwy, yn llys idaw.¹⁶

And one afternoon he was in Harlech in Ardudwy, in a court of his.

The parallelism is striking. Each clause consists of a temporal adverb (a compound of *gweith*) + preverbal particle + substantive verb + prepositional phrase beginning with *yn* + a *llys idaw* phrase. It is with the memory of these two markedly formulaic openings that we read the opening of the Fourth Branch, and it calls attention to itself not only by virtue of its disarming content but also by the fact that it departs so markedly from the pattern:

Ac yn yr oes honno, Math uab Mathonwy ny bydei uyw namyn tra uei y deudroet ymlyc croth morwyn, onyt kynwryf ryuel a’y llesteirei.¹⁷

In those days, Math son of Mathonwy could only live while his feet were in the lap of a maiden — unless the turmoil of war prevented him.

¹²Proinsias Mac Cana has discussed the implications of this sentence structure for the origins of the Four Branches and the history of Welsh prose narrative in *The Mabinogi*, Writers of Wales, second edition (Cardiff, 1992), pp. 12–20. ¹³Patrick Sims-Williams discusses the role in medieval Welsh tradition of the historical legend of a unitary Britain in ‘Some Functions of Origin Stories in Early Medieval Wales,’ in *History and Heroic Tale: A Symposium*, edited by Tore Nyberg and others (Odense, 1985), pp. 97–131. ¹⁴*Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, p. 39. ¹⁵*PKM*, p. 1 ¹⁶*ibid.*, p. 29. ¹⁷*ibid.*, p. 67.

On a purely formal level, first of all, there appears to be a departure from established procedure that is by definition startling, and perhaps quite self-consciously so. The sentence starts out more or less predictably, with *yn yr oes honno* ‘at that time’, taking the place of the far more specific *treigylgweith* ‘once’ or ‘on one occasion’, and *frynhawngueith* ‘one afternoon’.¹⁸ Then the formula completely falls apart, and we are back in the realm of the subject + verb sentence when we expected particle + substantive verb + prepositional phrase. Secondly, the expected reference to a character’s location at a particular time has been replaced by a bizarre detail — his ongoing predilection for keeping his feet in a virgin’s lap.

In addition, a profound contrast between the circumstances of the rulers in the First and Second branches, and of Pryderi in the Fourth, on the one hand, and those of Math, on the other, is immediately delineated by this syntactically anomalous sentence. Pwyll has the seven cantrefs of Dyfed and a number of courts, among which is Arberth. Bendigeidfran has the entire island of Britain and a number of courts, among which is Harlech. Pryderi has twenty-one of the cantrefs of Deheubarth. Math has Gwynedd, a place-name with real political resonance in medieval Wales. Rather than the amplitude of space that is suggested when a multiplicity of residences is implied by the naming of a specific place as *one* of a lord’s courts, however, the second sentence of the Fourth Branch implies restriction and limitation. Other lords can enjoy their lordship, moving from one court to another and passing their time hunting, picnicking on the cliffs, and feasting, as Pryderi does at Rhuddlan Teifi, ‘yd oed llys yno y Pryderi’¹⁹ (‘where Pryderi had a court’). As for Math, instead of ‘courts’ and ‘principal courts’ he has his *gwastatrwyd*²⁰ ‘a fixed abode’, with certain connotations of tranquillity and security.

*Gwastadrwyd*²¹ is a nominal formation from the adjective *gwastad*, and like its root has both the concrete meaning of a level place and the more abstract senses of uniformity, continuity, and constancy. By extension of these ideas, it can describe as well value-inflected modes of human experience: tranquillity, equanimity, and peace. Its semantic range also embraces the very concrete notion, related to all of its abstract senses, of a ‘fixed abode’ or ‘permanent dwelling’, and it has been taken to have that meaning in this passage by the editors of *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* and by W. J. Gruffydd,

¹⁸Sioned Davies (p. 39) casts her net beyond the opening lines, and incorporates into her analysis of the formulaic structure of the opening of the Fourth Branch the word *dydgueith* as it appears in line 20 of *PKM*, p. 67. ¹⁹*ibid.*, p. 69. ²⁰‘Ac ynteu yg Kaer Dathyl yn Aruon yd oed y wastatrwyd’; *ibid.*, p. 67. ²¹In discussing this word, I employ the Modern Welsh orthography. Citations for the word quote the orthography of the text referred to.

Ifor Williams, Patrick Ford, and Ian Hughes.²² In *their* translations of the Fourth Branch, on the other hand, Gwyn and Thomas Jones emphasized the more incorporeal connotations of the word: 'he found his tranquillity at Caer Dathyl in Arfon'.²³ J. Lloyd-Jones temporized, citing this instance of the word under the definition *cynefin, trigfan arhosol* 'home, permanent dwelling', but with a question, suggesting that it might rather have the sense of *heddwch, tawelwch, tangnefedd, bodlonrwydd* 'peace, tranquillity, satisfaction'.²⁴

Gwastadrwydd occurs twice in the poetry of Cynddelw (fl. c. 1155–c. 1195), who describes both Gwenwynwyn of Powys and Owain Gwynedd as sources of *ked westi wastadrwyd* or *gwesti gwastadrwyd*, which might be rendered as 'the *gwastadrwydd* of a welcome with gifts' and 'the *gwastadrwydd* of hospitality'.²⁵ In the thirteenth century, Dafydd Benfras (fl. c. 1220–c. 1258) says that Llywelyn ab Iorwerth was *cad wastadrwydd*, 'the *gwastadrwydd* of his host'.²⁶ These encomiastic formulae allude to a conviction that the hospitality of a good lord could be relied upon by his followers, but also suggest that as a source of stability in an unreliable world the lord was himself, metaphorically speaking, a kind of 'fixed abode' for the members of his *teulu*, or 'retinue'. The positive connotations of *gwastadrwydd* in these bardic locutions suggest that it might be appropriate to take Math's *gwastadrwydd* in Caer Dathyl as a sign of the stability and magnanimity of his kingship. Let us remember, though, that Math is not said to 'be' or to 'provide' *gwastadrwydd* at Caer Dathyl, but rather to *have* it.

With the use of the term in the Fourth Branch we might also compare that in *Ystoria Gereint uab Erbin*:

A ffan wybu ef hynny, dechreu caru esmwythder ac ysgyualwch a oruc ynteu — canyd oed neb a dalhei aruot yn y erbyn — a charu y wreic a **gwastadrwyd yn y lys**, a cherdeu a didanwch, a chartreuu yn hynny dalym a oruc, ac yn ol hynny caru yscualwch o'e ystauell a'y wreic hyd nad oed digrif dim ganthaw namyn hynny, yny yttoed yn colli callon y wyrda a'e

²²*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, pp. 1599c–1600a; Gruffydd, *Math*, p. 3; PKM, p. 252; *Math uab Mathonwy*, edited by Patrick K. Ford (Belmont, MA, 1999), p. 49, s.v.; see also his *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1977), p. 91; *Math uab Mathonwy*, edited by Ian Hughes (Aberystwyth, 2000), p. 88, s.v. ²³*The Mabinogion*, translated by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, revised edition (London and Rutland, VT, 1993), p. 47. ²⁴*Geirfa Barddoniaeth Gynnar Gymraeg*, 2 vols (Cardiff, 1931–63), II, 633b–634a. ²⁵*Cyfres Beirdd y Tywysogion*, general editor R. Geraint Gruffydd, 7 volumes (Cardiff, 1991–96), III, 20.26, and IV, 4.60. The orthography is that of the principal manuscript source of both poems, the Hendregadredd Manuscript (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS 6680B). ²⁶*Cyfres Beirdd y Tywysogion*, VI, 27.43. The orthography is that of the principal manuscript source of the poem, NLW, MS 4973B.

hela a'e digrifwch, a challon cwbyl o niuer y llys, ac yny oed ymodwrd a gogan arnaw dan law gan dylwyth y llys am y uot yn ymgolli yn gyn lwyret a hynny ac eu kydymdeithas hwynt o garyat gwreic.²⁷

And when he knew this [that his reputation for martial prowess and wealth was well established throughout his realm], he began to love ease and leisure, for there was no one whom it was worth his while to fight. And he loved his wife and **gwastadrwydd in his court** and songs and entertainment, and he stayed at home for a while. And after that he loved the privacy of his chamber with his wife, so that nothing was pleasant to him except that, so that he was losing his noblemen's hearts along with their hunting and their entertainment, and the hearts of all the retinue of the court, and so that there was a murmuring of mockery at him by the people of the court because he was so completely abandoning them and their company for the love of a woman.

The editor of *Gereint*, R. L. Thomson, is reluctant to assign a date to the composition of the romance, but concludes that it 'has to be at least a little later' than 1136.²⁸ There would seem to be no question about the fact that in *Gereint* the connotations of *gwastadrwydd* are negative, at least from the point of view of Gereint's courtiers. They perceive his love of *gwastadrwyd yn y lys*, '*gwastadrwydd* in his court', as an aspect of the unseemly uxoriousness that threatens his reputation for martial prowess and, ultimately, by extension, their own security. More immediately, the withdrawal of his own presence from court society signals the advent of an excess of peace, of *gwastadrwydd* in an important extrapolated sense: life is dull at court, and the restlessness of his people stirs up the beginnings of disloyalty among them. It is always a danger for the absent or remote leader, of course, that his followers will begin to complain and to plot behind his back. Thomson notes that GPC refers this instance of *gwastadrwydd* to the sense of 'peace, tranquillity, etc.', but goes on to observe that 'in view of *cartreuu* following it is also worth considering sense 2 "permanent dwelling", referring to Math's fixed residence at Caer Dathyl'.²⁹ This comment points to the close connection between the two senses of the word that seems to obtain in *Math* as well; I would suggest, furthermore, that the negative associations of *gwastadrwydd* in *Gereint* are also present in the Fourth Branch.

Math's situation is conspicuously different from that of the other lords in the Mabinogi. The structure of the opening sentences of the Fourth Branch makes the point, and the use of the term *gwastadrwydd* underscores the fact. Math is immobile, stuck in his mysterious ritual position, with his feet in a girl's lap. Is this an attribute of Math's sacral kingship? Is it funny? Is it sad? Surely it is something

²⁷*Ystoria Gereint uab Erbin*, edited by Robert L. Thomson (Dublin, 1997), pp. 24–25 (lines 688–97). ²⁸*ibid.*, p. lxxvii. ²⁹*ibid.*, p. 103.

more than an unmarked fact that can be used to set aspects of the plot in motion. Surely it is *strange*, even in the context of the Four Branches.

Returning to the opening sentences for a moment, we might consider the implications of the verb in the second part of the formula as it is deployed in Math. In the First and Second branches, as noted above, that formula consists of a temporal adverb + preverbal particle + *bod* + prepositional phrase beginning with *yn* + a *llys idaw* phrase. In the Fourth Branch, it takes the form

Ac yn yr oes honno, Math uab Mathonwy **ny bydei uyw** namyn tra uei y deudroet ymlyc croth morwyn, onyt kynwryf ryuel a'y llesteirei.

At that time, Math son of Mathonwy **ny bydei uyw** unless his feet were in the lap of a maiden — unless the turmoil of war prevented him.

Not only does the account of Math's idiosyncratic requirement replace the locational phrase, but the consuetudinal past replaces the ordinary imperfect as the form of the verb *bod*. Like Gruffydd, Jones and Jones translated this verbal phrase as '**might** not live save . . .', and Patrick Ford as '**could** only live while . . .'.³⁰ It would be possible, however, to render the phrase as '**would** not live unless . . .' or even 'was not in the habit of living without'.³¹ Alternatively, the translation 'could only live while . . .' might be taken as an exaggeration of the truth, or a statement of the case as perceived by Math rather than a statement of an ontological fact. Read thus, the sentence suggests that Math is not so much a king with a taboo as he is a king with too much of a taste for the good life, his back to the fire and a beautiful girl cuddled up against him.

For the most part, readings of Math's idiosyncratic requirement as a condition of his very life have either assumed a mythic or magical background to the role of the virgin footholder in the life of the king, or regarded it as a borrowing from 1 Kings 1, 1–4, in which Abishag the Shunamite sleeps chastely with the aged King David in order to keep him warm. None has offered a detailed interpretation of the myth or the biblical borrowing, however, except John Carey. Carey reads Goewin and the ritual in which she participates in terms of well-established Celtic myths of sovereignty. In order to do so, however, he constructs an otherwise unattested facet of that

³⁰Gruffydd, *Math*, p. 3; *Mabinogion*, translated by Jones and Jones, p. 47; Ford, *Mabinogi*, p. 91. ³¹W. J. Gruffydd is the only translator, as far as I know, to have commented at all upon the fact that his translation represents an interpretation of the text, that *na bydei uyw* is a less than transparent phrase: 'we have taken for granted that the phrase *na bydei uyw*, "would not live", "vivus non esset," means that otherwise, for some reason or other, Math would die or be killed' (p. 54).

mythology in which a kind of prelapsarian earth is represented as virgin, in contrast with the sexually very active goddesses of the other known realizations of the myth. As he puts it, 'in *Math* we have the remnant . . . of a myth describing the end of a paradisaic state of being, and the emergence of the conditions of mortality'.³² In my discussions of *Pwyll* and *Manawydan*, I have argued that a memory of the resonances of the sovereignty myth, and of the significance of the figure of Rhiannon, survived into the eleventh or twelfth century and informed the Mabinogi author's use of his materials.³³ Accordingly, I find Carey's reading of *Math* extremely attractive. However, it has to be remembered that it is the text alone that provides him with evidence of the myth which in turn serves to explain the text. Carey's argument is engaging, but far from being so compelling as to close down discussion, as he himself seems to acknowledge.³⁴

The names of some characters in the Fourth Branch — Math, Gwydion, and Lleu — resonate in Welsh tradition.³⁵ But Goewin is another matter: neither she nor her lineage are known to Welsh tradition outside the Fourth Branch, as far as we can tell. There is none of the resonance in her name that is evoked by Rhiannon, whose regal name is supported not only by her regal bearing as a literary character, but by the various ways in which she can be associated with the continental Celtic goddess Epona.³⁶ As for Goewin, Ian Hughes has suggested that her name, which occurs elsewhere as an adjective meaning 'bold' or 'daring', may have been chosen by the author as an ironic comment on the self-effacing character of the maiden, as is the name of Pwyll ('prudence, good sense') in the First Branch.³⁷ She is in all likelihood an invented, rather than a traditional, character. And if that is the case, there is no reason to mythologize her, and no reason not to read Math's relationship to Goewin as one that he has created for himself, rather than having it ritually imposed upon him, and as one that is perhaps not viewed favourably by the author.

³²'A British Myth of Origins?', *Journal of the History of Religions*, 31 (1991), 24–38 (p. 35). ³³'Theme of Sovereignty in *Pwyll*', pp. 45–47 (pp. 316–18 of reprint); 'Learning Lordship', pp. 106–7. ³⁴'A British Myth of Origins?', p. 36. ³⁵See *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads*, edited and translated by Rachel Bromwich, second edition (Cardiff, 1978), pp. 448–50 on Math, pp. 400–1 on Gwydion, and pp. 420–22 on Lleu; *Math*, edited by Ford, pp. xiv–xv on Math, and pp. xxi–xxiv on Lleu; edited by Hughes, pp. viii–xii on Math, pp. xvii–xxiii on Gwydion, and pp. xxix–xxxiv on Lleu. All of these scholars have cited the possibility of a link between Math's sister, Dôn, and the Irish Danu, mother of the supernatural Tuatha Dé Danann and eponym of the River Danube (*Trioedd*, edited and translated by Bromwich, p. 327; *Math*, edited by Ford, pp. xiii–xiv; edited by Hughes, pp. xvi–xviii), but compare John T. Koch, 'Some Suggestions and Etymologies Reflecting upon the Mythology in the Four Branches', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 9 (1989), 1–11 (pp. 4–5). ³⁶Ford, *Mabinogi*, pp. 4–7. ³⁷*Math*, p. xv.

While editors and commentators have generally refrained from a detailed exploration of the underlying myth in Math's need for a virgin footholder, all have pointed to the court officer known as the *troediog* as pertinent, in a general way, to this circumstance.³⁸ According to the medieval Welsh tractate known as the 'Laws of Court', a *troediog* 'footholder' was one of the customary officers in the court of a Welsh king. The earliest, Cyfnerth, redaction, describes the office thus:

Troeda6c bieu eistet y dan draet y brenhin. O un dyskyl a'r brenhin y b6yta. Ef a ennyn y kann6ylleu rac bron y brenhin 6rth y wyt ac eissoes b6yd seic a g6ira6t a geif gan nyt oes gyued ida6. Y tir a geif yn ryd a march bythosep a geif y gan y brenhin. Ran a geif o alyant y g6estuaeu.

A footholder is to sit beneath the feet of the king. It is from the same dish as the king that he shall eat. He lights the candles before the king at his food and notwithstanding he has a mess of food and liquor though he does not partake of the feast. He shall have his land free and a horse always ready from the king. He shall have a share of the silver of the *gwestfâu*.³⁹

The Laws of Court have recently been subjected to close scholarly scrutiny in *The Welsh King and His Court*.⁴⁰ Several of the essays in this excellent volume offer useful perspectives on the Fourth Branch. They call into question a perhaps too unexamined acceptance of the degree to which the Laws of Court describe historical practice, and an equally uncritical attitude to their origin and purpose. In the process, and by extension, they require us to think again about what is going on in the opening of the Fourth Branch.

Robin Chapman Stacey, for example, is quite explicit in the opening paragraph of her essay on 'King, Queen, and *Edling* in the Laws of Court' that the tractate is not 'reflective to any easily appreciable degree of the historical realities of medieval Welsh courts' and that it is 'one of the best arguments that exists against the notion that the boundary between history and literature is at all hard and fast'. She describes it as 'stylized, outrageously artificial, and even funny'.⁴¹ The image conjured up by the description of the *troediog* in the text is certainly all of that. In the Iorwerth redaction, we are informed that

Ef a dele e tyr yn ryd a'e uarch pressvel a'e urethenwysc e gan e brenhyn

³⁸See, for example, Gruffydd, *Math*, p. 54; PKM, p. 250; *Math*, edited by Ford, pp. xvi and 21; edited by Hughes, p. 21. ³⁹'The Laws of Court from Cyfnerth', edited by Morfydd E. Owen, in *The Welsh King and His Court*, edited by T. M. Charles-Edwards and others (Cardiff, 2000), pp. 425–77 (pp. 464–65). ⁴⁰*Welsh King and His Court*, edited by Charles-Edwards and others (see n. 39 above). ⁴¹*ibid.*, pp. 29–62 (p. 29).

a'e lyeynwysc y gan e urenhynes; a'r sydd honno a dav o ureynt tyr ydau. Ef a dele dale traet e brenhyn en e arfet o'r pan dechreuho eysted en e kyuedach ene el e kyscu, ac a dele cossy e brenhyn, ac eg kyhyt a henne o espeyt gvyllhet ef e brenhyn rac guall. E navd yv o'r pan dotto e brenhyn e traet en e arfet ene el y'v estauell, dven e den a wnel e kam. Ef a dele bvytta ar un dyskyl a'r brenhyn, a'e keven ar e tan. E sarhaet yv chue buv a chue ugeynt o alyant; e werth yv chue buv a chue ugeyn muv.

He is entitled to his land free and his horse in attendance, and his woollen clothing from the king and his linen clothing from the queen. And that office comes to him in right of land. It is right for him to hold the king's feet in his lap from when he begins sitting at the banquet until he goes to sleep, and to scratch the king, and for as long a period as that let him guard the king from harm. His protection is from when the King puts his feet into his lap until he goes to his chamber, to take the person who commits the offence. It is right for him to eat from the same dish as the King, with his back to the fire. His *sarhaed* is six kine and six score pence; his worth is six kine and six score kine.⁴²

The role of the *troediog* as formally articulated in the Laws of Court suggests a position of considerable intimacy with the ruler and of substantial personal privilege — aspects of status that are associated in this tractate for neither the first nor the last time in human history. His proximity to the king in the protocol of the seating arrangements in hall assures him access to the choicest food and drink and to the comfort of the fire. He holds his land, apparently, free of obligation to service — presumably meaning menial service, since the footholding itself is a kind of service — owns or has the use of a horse, and receives clothing directly from the king and queen. His *sarhaed*, the value upon which his entitlement to compensation for legal injury or insult would be computed, is two-thirds that of the steward (*distain*) and equivalent to that of the queen's steward, the court justice (*ynad llys*), the chamberlain (*gwas ystafell*), and the other officers of the court. And, we may note, there is no doubt whatever in the minds of the jurists that the *troediog* is male: male and wealthy (since he holds his office in right of land) — whatever might be his status as far as virginity is concerned.

The *troediog* is also, of course, an aspect of the king's own status and privilege. To quote Robin Chapman Stacey once again, the Laws of Court, 'whatever else it may be about . . . is surely, above all else, "about" Welsh kingship'.⁴³ What is from one perspective an enumeration of the rights and responsibilities of the officers of the

⁴²*Llyfr Iorwerth: A Critical Text of the Venedotian Code of Medieval Welsh Law*, edited by Aled Rhys Wiliam (Cardiff, 1960), §32, p. 18; *The Law of Hywel Dda*, translated by Dafydd Jenkins, *The Welsh Classics* (Llandysul, 1986), pp. 32–33. ⁴³'King, Queen, and *Edling* in the Laws of Court', p. 31.

court is from another an elaboration of the entitlements of the king. Among these is the right to have his person kept warm while at the feast, and to enjoy not only the knowledge that he is the only person entitled to have his feet looked after by a specially designated officer, but also the sense of importance that comes with that knowledge. Within the artificial construct that is the tractate on the Laws of Court, the *troediog* enacts with an extravagant flourish the surpassing privilege envisaged by its compilers for the king.

The atmosphere in which the *troediog* is situated by the Laws of Court is resolutely courtly, in the most worldly sense of the word. He takes his place among falconers, grooms, and huntsmen; among brewers, bakers, cooks, and smiths; among clerics, jurists, and poets. The ideal court of which he is a customary and usual officer may be 'ritualized', in the sense that it is a highly artificial construct, but it has no particular connection with 'ritual' in a strictly religious sense, or in the sense that ritual is associated with sacral and hieratic kingships. The *troediog* belongs among the court officers who see to the king's comfort, most particularly the chamberlain. Dafydd Jenkins emphasizes that it is the *cyfeddach* 'the feast' that is the principal focus of the Laws of Court and that fully half of the officers discussed in the tractate are concerned with the feast.⁴⁴ That royal feasts were occasions not only for the display of power, but also for the display and enactment of the pecking order among the elite will come as no news here, and in that performance of the subtleties of status the *troediog* would have been shown to some advantage.

There is no specific discussion of the *troediog* anywhere in *The Welsh King and His Court*, but there are nonetheless a number of observations that can help us to read and to think differently about Math and his relationship to Goewin. Dafydd Jenkins, for example, discussing the relationship of the Laws of Court to actual practice in thirteenth-century Wales, points out that 'the Welsh name for the steward, *distain*, indicates that this office was originally concerned with the royal dishes at table, but everyone knows that Goronwy ab Ednyfed, *distain* to Llywelyn [ap Gruffudd], was a prime minister who did not regularly wait on the ruler and his immediate companions at table, as the court tractate requires', although, as he acknowledges in a footnote to this passage, 'there is some reason to believe that Goronwy would have done the traditional service at . . . special festivals'.⁴⁵ These remarks are entirely consistent with his comment on the *troediog* in his 1986 translation of the Laws. There he wrote that 'it is hardly likely that a footholder carried out his physical duties at any thirteenth-century Welsh court, and the refer-

ence to its passing in right of land suggests that it had become an honorific sinecure'.⁴⁶ Yet the *troediog* to Llywelyn ap Gruffudd may have sat at his feet on especially ceremonial occasions, while the eminent Goronwy ab Ednyfed attended to the dish from which both prince and footholder ate. It is not difficult to imagine that a distinguished *troediog* might have been deployed as an aspect of the spectacle at an important feast — one at which there was hegemony to be asserted, an alliance to be contracted, or a warning to be conveyed.

In any event, it would seem to be in large measure the world of a twelfth-century, rather than a thirteenth-century, court that is evoked by the lexicon of the Laws of Court, albeit in an idealized way.⁴⁷ Although the dating of the text of the Four Branches remains a vexed question, the implicit consensus places it somewhere in the twelfth century.⁴⁸ In our present limited state of knowledge, then, we may reasonably imagine the court of Math fab Mathonwy and that of the *brenhin* in the Laws of Court to be imaginative remakings of Welsh courts as they existed at roughly the same time: that is, of twelfth-century courts. I believe that it is the very material, embodied world of these contemporary courts — the kind of world in which the tale was being performed or read — that the opening of *Math* is most likely to have recalled, at least as vividly as it summoned images of a mythic past. Presumably, however, the medieval audience would have taken note of the fact that Math's footholder is a young woman. This detail might have suggested the practices of a remote, legendary past. It might just as well, though, have evoked a knowing laugh and a wink at the expense of an actual, male *troediog* or a lecherous king. Ian Hughes has suggested that the female footholder and her absolute necessity to the king may be inventions of the author of the Four Branches, rather than a

⁴⁶*Law of Hywel Dda*, p. 231. ⁴⁷According to David Stephenson, 'The Laws of Court: Past Reality or Present Ideal?', in *Welsh King and His Court*, edited by Charles-Edwards and others, pp. 400–14 (pp. 400–1). ⁴⁸See especially Brynley F. Roberts, 'Where Were the Four Branches of the Mabinogi Written?', in *The Individual in Celtic Literatures*, CSANA Yearbook, 1, edited by Joseph Falaky Nagy (Dublin, 2001), pp. 61–73 (pp. 71–72). Roberts suggests that the composition of the Four Branches ought to be situated within the active literary culture of Gwynedd that flourished from the reign of Gruffudd ap Cynan (d. 1137) until the end of Welsh independence in 1282, but earlier than *Breuddwyd Maxen Wledig*, which he dates to 'the first half of the thirteenth century'. In 1970, Thomas Charles-Edwards had proposed a range of 1050–1120 for the composition of the Four Branches in 'The Date of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *THSC*, 1970, pp. 263–98, reprinted in *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays*, edited by Sullivan, pp. 19–58. Without advancing a different date, however, Patrick Sims-Williams effectively criticized the bases of Charles-Edwards's dating in 'The Submission of Irish Kings in Fact and Fiction: Henry II, Bendigeidfran, and the Dating of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*', *CMCS*, 22 (Winter 1991), 31–61.

⁴⁴'Prolegomena to the Laws of Court', in *Welsh King and His Court*, edited by Charles-Edwards and others, pp. 15–28 (p. 24). ⁴⁵*ibid.*, p. 15.

traditional element in the story of Math, an attempt to lend deeper significance to the role of *troediog* by attributing to Math a mysterious affliction.⁴⁹ I would suggest that the affliction in question is a moral one, a species of *acedia*, or sloth, of the same sort that throws Gereint's life out of balance.

According to the reading that I am suggesting, Math would not be an ideal king, at least not at the outset, but rather someone with a lesson or two to learn about effective governance. This interpretation makes sense of the disappearance of Goewin from the story soon after she is raped. Math redeems her shame by marrying her, but we hear nothing further of her after that, as we might expect to if she carried into the redaction strong associations with a sovereignty goddess. Rather, faced with war, Math resumes perforce the kind of life that is appropriate for a ruler, a life in which women are relegated to the background.

When Gwydion and Gilfaethwy return to Gwynedd with the pigs that they have acquired by deceit from Pryderi, lord of Dyfed, Math is still in Caer Dathl, at his permanent court, or *gwastadrwydd*. However, the *cynnwrf rhyfel* 'turmoil of war', the only thing that forces or allows Math to take his feet out of the girl's lap and bestir himself, has come upon him, and he heads off to nearby Penardd, inadvertently making possible the sexual violence against Goewin that has been the object of the entire enterprise from the nephews' point of view. Subsequently, Math is not only outraged by the rape of his footholder, but also deeply saddened by the warfare that has made it possible, and this despite the fact that it has been a great victory for the men of Gwynedd, from which 'gwy'r Gwynedd a ymchweles dracheuyn yn llawen orawenus' ('the men of Gwynedd returned home happy and full of high spirits').⁵⁰ Math says that

'Bei uy ewyllwys, ny chollwn o wyr ac arueu a golleis. Vyg kywilyd ny ellwch chwi y dalu i mi, heb anghau Pryderi'.⁵¹

'were it my will, I would not have lost what I did of men and arms. You cannot compensate me for my shame, to say nothing of Pryderi's death'.

Yet Math is undeniably complicit in the loss of some of his men and of Pryderi, who was presumably his ally. He wanted the pigs, probably

⁴⁹*Math*, edited by Hughes, p. 21. Meinir Harris concurs that the female footholder may be an adaptation of traditional practice by the author of the Four Branches to suit literary ends, but suggests that practice may in fact have evolved, replacing the male *troediog* with a girl: Meinir Elin Harris, 'Dychwelyd at Gyfeiriadau, Termau a Chysyniadau Cyfreithiol yn y Mabinogi', *Y Traethodydd*, 664 (January 2003), 17–39 (p. 30). ⁵⁰*PKM*, p. 73; *Math*, edited by Ford, lines 194–95; edited by Hughes, line 152. ⁵¹*PKM*, p. 74; *Math*, edited by Ford, lines 228–31; edited by Hughes, lines 178–79.

for the same sorts of reason that have always made high-status persons desire whatever other high-status persons have. He authorized his nephews' embassy to Pryderi without inquiring at all deeply into the nature of their plan for acquiring the animals. He stayed home, uninvolved, enjoying his *gwastadrwydd* and the comforts offered by his *troediog*.

We do not have to look far for evidence that Welsh tradition knew that the nearest male relatives of a king could be dangerous fellows. The Second Branch gives us Bendigeidfran's half-brother Efnisien, who undoes a potentially very advantageous alliance between Britain and Ireland, all because of a sense of injured dignity, and a slightly later Welsh tale, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, provides the figure of Iorwerth ap Maredudd, brother to Madog ap Maredudd, lord of Powys. Iorwerth and Madog (d. 1160) are historical figures. As Iorwerth is represented in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*,

Hwnnw a gymerth goueileint mawr yndaw a thristwch o welet yr enryded a'r medyant a oed y vrawt ac ynteu heb dim. Ac ymgeissaw a oruc a'e gedymdeithon a'e vrodoryon maeth, ac ymgyghor ac wynt beth a wnelei am hynny. Sef y kynnigywys Madawc idaw, y pennteuluaeth a chystal ac idaw ehun, a meirch ac arueu ac enryded. A gwrthot hynny a oruc Iorwoerth, a mynet ar herw hyt yn Lloeger, a llad kalaned a llosgi tei a dala karcharoryon a oruc Iorwoerth.

He felt great heaviness and sorrow at seeing the honour and power that were his brother's, whereas he had naught. And he sought out his comrades and foster-brothers and took counsel of them what he should do about it. They decided by their counsel to send some from amongst them to demand provision for him. The offer Madawg made him was the captaincy of his war-band, and equal standing with himself, and steeds and arms and honour. And Iorwerth rejected that, and went harrying into Lloegr. And Iorwerth made slaughter and burned houses and carried off prisoners.⁵²

What Iorwerth rejects is an offer to serve as Madog's *penteulu*, the captain of the king's militia and a person of considerable status as imagined by the Laws of Court. The Iorwerth redaction of those laws prescribes that

E penteulu a dely bot yn uab y'r brenhyn, neu yn ney, neu yn kywuvch gvr ac y galler penteulu ohanav. . . . E lety yv y ty mvyhaf en e tref a chymeruedhaf, ac ygyd ac ef er rey a vynho o'r teylu, a'r lleyll en y gylch, ual y bo prytuerth ydau ef eu caffael hvy vrth y reyt. A'r eyl seyc

⁵²*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, edited by Melville Richards (Cardiff, 1948), p. 1, lines 6–17; *Mabinogion*, translated by Jones and Jones, p. 137.

anrydedussaf en e llys a dely ef y chaffael, a henny en gyntaf guedy y brenhyn.⁵³

He should be 'the king's son or nephew, or a man so high that he can be made captain of the household'. He has 'the largest house in the townland, and the most central', and lodges there with however many he wishes of the *teulu*. Among his numerous entitlements is 'the second most honourable dish in the court, after the king'. He is also entitled, in the view of the tractate, to go on circuit, or *cylch*, once a year, along with a considerable retinue, and to be billeted on the people in the same way that the king himself would be:

Ef a dely kylch e gan e brenhyn guedy guahano ac ef e Nodolyc, ef a'r teylu. . . . Ac guedy darfo e kylch hvnnv deu et ef ar e brenhyn a thryccet egyt ac ef hyt em pen e blvydyn; ac ny dely mynet e ganthav onyt y'v negesseu ef, a llen a yr achav na dely ef mynet e vrthav ef, canys tredyd anhepcor brenyn yv y teylu (e deu ereyll ynt y effeyryat teylu a'y egnat llys).

He is entitled to a circuit from the king, after he parts from him at Christmas, together with his bodyguard. . . . And after that circuit is ended, let him come to the King and let him stay with him until the end of a year; and he is not entitled to leave him except on his errands. And here is the reason that he is not entitled to leave him, that the bodyguard is one of three indispensables of a king: the two others are the priest of his household and his court justice.⁵⁴

Once again, we must remember that the Laws of Court cannot be taken to describe precisely the reality of a medieval Welsh court, but rather to express their authors' sense of the nature and role of kingship in Welsh society. The description of the *penteulu* seems to recognize both the vital role in a king's maintenance of authority played by a strong military force, and the inherent danger posed to the king's security by that very militia, should it become too independent of him. Thomas Charles-Edwards has drawn attention to the fact that 'the *penteulu* was someone other than the *edling*, the heir-apparent, and yet was said by the lawbooks to be a son or brother's son of the king'. From this stipulation he concludes that 'the implication is that the *penteulu* might have been the heir-apparent, but had, in the event, been excluded from the succession'. In fact, he

⁵³*Llyfr Iorwerth*, edited by Wiliam, §6, p. 4; *Law of Hywel Dda*, translated by Jenkins, pp. 8–9. ⁵⁴*Llyfr Iorwerth*, edited by Wiliam, §6, p. 5; *Law of Hywel Dda*, translated by Jenkins, p. 11. I have quoted from the *Iorwerth* redaction rather than the older *Cyfneth* text because the provisions pertaining to the *penteulu* are conveniently gathered there into one section. With regard to the *penteulu*, *Iorwerth* is consistent with *Cyfneth* except for the important fact that *Cyfneth* does not discuss the *cylch*.

makes reference to *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* in this connection, speculating that it may reflect the truth of what happened more accurately than has been imagined:

If, for example, *Iorwerth Goch* really was offered the position of *penteulu* by his brother, *Madog ap Maredudd*, he exemplifies the point, for *Madog's* son, *Llywelyn*, appears to have been the *edling*, while further contenders, such as *Owain Cyfeiliog*, were in the background.⁵⁵

In *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, I would suggest, *Iorwerth ap Maredudd* rejects the *penteuluaeth* because it does not offer him enough. *Madog* promises 'equal standing with himself' (*cystal ac idaw e hun*), but *Iorwerth* seems not to believe him, and in his envy turns to a life of crime that is intended to bring to an end his brother's reign.

In *Math*, *Gwydion* and *Gilfaethwy* appear to serve as joint *penteuluoedd* to their uncle, since they go on *cylch* with the militia, or *teulu*:

A ny allei gylchu y wlat, namyn Giluathwy uab Don [a *Gwydion*] uab Don, [y] nyeint, ueibon y chwaer, a'r teulu gyt ac wy [a *aei*] y gylchu y wlat drostaw.⁵⁶

And he was incapable of making a circuit of his land, but rather *Gilfaethwy* son of *Dôn* and *Gwydion* son of *Dôn*, his nephews, his sister's sons, and the war-band with them, would go to make circuit of his land for him.

They seem to do this not only once a year, but as often as the king himself might, except that by his own choice they leave him at home and spend all their time on 'his errands'. Insofar as the tractate proposes that a king's militia should not often be out of his reach and control, then the working relationship that *Math* has established with his *teulu* would appear to be ill-considered. It is not only that, left too much to their own devices, they come up with ill-advised schemes like the deceitful acquisition of *Pryderi's* pigs.⁵⁷ It is that their autonomy fosters the growth of envy. The rebellious desires of the nephews are not represented in explicit political terms, but are readily apparent in *Gilfaethwy's* determination to seize a symbol of his uncle's status and power — his footholder — and make her his

⁵⁵T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Food, Drink and Clothing in the Laws of Court', in *Welsh King and His Court*, edited by Charles-Edwards and others, pp. 319–37 (p. 324).

⁵⁶*PKM*, p. 67; *Math*, edited by Ford, lines 11–14; edited by Hughes, lines 9–12.

⁵⁷Drawing upon the work of Wendy Davies, A. D. Carr discusses the problems created for tenth- and eleventh-century Welsh kings by their *teuluoedd*, including several instances in which members of the band were convicted of rape: '*Teulu and Penteulu*', in *Welsh King and His Court*, edited by Charles-Edwards and others, pp. 63–81 (pp. 65–66).

own. The violence with which he takes Goewin precludes a romantic reading of the lovesickness that he suffers for her; that illness is, rather, *invidia* or envy, the desire to have what another has.

For Math, the rape of his virgin footholder is an insult both to his person and to his office. It is not only Goewin's role as his *troediog* that is at issue here; it is also the case that, according to the Laws, every rape of a virgin constituted an offence against the king, whether she stood in personal relation to him or not. This is apparent in the stipulation that among the penalties for *trais morwyn* ('violence against a maiden'), in addition to penalties payable to the victim and to her lord, a *dirwy* ('fine') is payable to the king.⁵⁸ The rebellion of Math's nephews is less overt than that of Iorwerth ap Madog in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. Yet even Iorwerth's revolt is figured rather as disruptive behaviour, the creation of trouble for his brother, than as a direct assault upon his political position.

The assault on his regal privilege, and its implications for his status, are at the heart of the shame, the *cywilydd*, of Math. As Goewin stresses when she recounts the event to Math,

'threis arnaf a orugant a chywilydd y titheu, a chyscu a wnaethpwynt gennyf, a hynny i'th ystauell ac i'th wely'.⁵⁹

'they raped me and shamed you, for I was slept with in your chamber and in your bed'.

His kingship, as embodied in his prerogatives, has been challenged by a man qualified by birth to be his successor. The moment in which Math finds himself without a virgin footholder, without an alliance with the men of the South, and unable to rely on the kinsmen he has trusted, is the moment at which the inadequacies of his lordship are exposed both to himself and to the audience of the tale. Math's *acedia* has enabled his nephews to stir up enmity between Gwynedd and the South and to bring down upon him the shame of having deceived and stolen from a noble lord. The rape of Goewin, on one level, re-enacts simultaneously within both the domestic and the public arenas the assault upon his authority that Gwydion and Gilfaethwy have already committed. Math is challenged to respond in a kingly manner.

⁵⁸Morfydd Owen has written of this *dirwy* that 'in the Iorwerth text this is specified as being twelve kine but elsewhere in terms which make it virtually identical with the king's *sarhaed* ['insult,' 'compensation for insult']; according to these texts it consists either of a silver rod, a golden plate and cup or of the silver rod alone. The implication of this rule is that the safe keeping of virgins lay within the king's *nawdd* or protection' ('Shame and Reparation: Woman's Place in the Kin', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, edited by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff, 1980), pp. 40–68 (p. 49)).

⁵⁹*PKM*, p. 74; *Math*, edited by Ford, lines 213–15; edited by Hughes, lines 167–68.

Now, while Goewin seems not to have been a figure familiar to Welsh tradition, Math — along with his nephew Gwydion — brought with him to his role in the Fourth Branch a set of strong associations with magical powers. Identified in the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* as one of the three great enchanter of the Island of Britain, he is also mentioned in connection with magical power in several poems in the Book of Taliesin. Math's appearance in the Triads attests to his having been known as a magician to the *cyfarwyddiaid* 'traditional storytellers' of the period in which the Four Branches were put into writing.⁶⁰

An informed — or *cyfarwydd* — audience, and certainly anyone well enough versed in Welsh traditions to fashion the written text of the Four Branches, would almost certainly have thought of Math, and of his nephew Gwydion, as persons who manifested their wills in displays of magic.⁶¹ Rachel Bromwich has written of the Fourth Branch that

The main concern of this branch of the Mabinogi would seem to be to illustrate the magical powers of Math and his nephew Gwydion, the two great magicians of Gwynedd. Indeed, the first part of the story resolves itself into a contest in magic between the two, in which Gwydion temporarily outwits his uncle by causing the violation of his virgin *troedawc* 'footholder'. Math is able to repay the injury by inflicting on his nephew a series of animal-transformations . . . but after this episode is concluded the two magicians are portrayed as working in collaboration rather than in rivalry.⁶²

My own approach to the relationship of Math and Gwydion is largely implicit in these remarks. Magic was as much their medium as is military action to the martial hero or powerful discourse to the poet. It is through the exercise of magical power, then, that Math must reassert and re-establish his kingship, as it was through the exercise of Gwydion's magical power that he was disgraced.

Math's power is very much in abeyance in the opening moves of

⁶⁰These references to Math in the *Triads*, the Book of Taliesin, and the Irish sources, as well as pertinent later references in the poetry of the *Cywyddwyr*, are fully and conveniently presented by Ian Hughes in his edition of *Math*, pp. viii–xii. See also the discussion of the figure of Math in *Trioedd*, edited and translated by Bromwich, Triad 28 (p. 56) and pp. 448–50, and *Math*, edited by Ford, pp. xiv–xv. Math's traditional association with enchantment has sometimes been thought to be related to that of an Irish figure — a Tuatha Dé Danann druid by the name of Math mac Úmair, mentioned in the *Lebor Gabála*. See *Trioedd*, edited and translated by Bromwich, p. 448; *Math*, edited by Ford, p. xiv; edited by Hughes, p. viii. ⁶¹Gwydion too was known to Welsh tradition as an enchanter. See *Math*, edited by Hughes, pp. xviii–xxiii; *Trioedd*, edited and translated by Bromwich, pp. 400–2. According to the text of Triad 28 in the White Book of Rhydderch, Math taught magic to Gwydion, but Rachel Bromwich takes this detail to be derived from the Fourth Branch itself (*Trioedd*, p. 56). ⁶²*ibid.*, p. 449.

the tale. There are only two reasons even to imagine that he has the sort of power that he will subsequently display in the punishment of his nephews. One is tradition, the lore recorded in the Triads and presumably known to poets, storytellers, and those who listened to them throughout Wales. The other is the trait that Gilfaethwy ascribes to him:

'Ti a wlost', heb ynteu, 'kynedyf Math uab Mathonwy: ba hustyng bynnac, yr y uychanet, o'r a uo y rwng dynnyon, o ry kyuarfo y guynt ac ef, ef a'y guybyd.'⁶³

'You know', he said, 'Math fab Mathonwy's nature: whatever whisper — no matter how small — passes between men, if it falls on the wind he will know it.'

Math's uncanny hearing is the sort of trait that is associated with any number of folktale characters in Welsh and other traditions.⁶⁴ In itself, it is insufficient to signal that Math is one of the three great enchanters of the Island of Britain, but it is almost certainly meant to evoke the greater powers attributed to him by tradition. In addition, I would propose, the motif of preternatural hearing ability has been selected to serve this purpose with deliberate and ironic intent. The fact is that Math is utterly unaware of what is going on all about him: he knows nothing of Gilfaethwy's designs on Goewin, nothing of the underhand way in which Gwydion has obtained the pigs from Pryderi, nothing of Pryderi's outrage on discovering that he has been duped, and nothing until the eleventh hour of the invasion of Gwynedd by the men of the South.⁶⁵ His ignorance is a function of his torpor. Even as Gereint knows nothing of his people's murmurings, and so misinterprets Enid's tears,⁶⁶ so too is Math prevented, by the pleasure he takes in his *gwastadrwydd*, from understanding the dangers that surround him. Because this is a story about Math, the

⁶³PKM, p. 68; *Math*, edited by Ford, lines 28–31; edited by Hughes, lines 21–24.

⁶⁴The most familiar analogue in Welsh tradition, of course, is the *gormes* or oppression of the Coranieid in *Cyfranc Llud a Llefelys*: 'a chymeint oed eu gwybot ac nat oed ymadrawd dros wyneb yr ynys, yr issed y dywettit, o'r kyuarffei y gwynt ac ef, nys gwypynt' ('and so great was their knowledge that there was no speech over the face of the island, no matter how softly it was spoken, that they didn't know about, if the wind encountered it'): *Cyfranc Llud a Llefelys*, edited by Brynley F. Roberts (Dublin, 1975), lines 32–35 (p. 2); Roberts notes the similarity to the *cynnedf* of Math (p. 9).

⁶⁵It is possible to read the exchange between Gwydion and Gilfaethwy on the topic of Gilfaethwy's lovesickness (PKM, pp. 67–68; *Math*, edited by Ford, lines 20–39; edited by Hughes, lines 17–30) as a deliberate elaboration of the joke. '“Yr hynn a deryw ymi ny frwytha ymi y adef y neb”' ('“It will do me no good to confess it to anyone”'), claims Gilfaethwy, because Math will hear of it. Yet when Gwydion speaks the secret, '“caru Goewin yd wyt ti”' ('“you're in love with Goewin”'), Math evidently does *not* hear. ⁶⁶*Gereint*, edited by Thomson, lines 707–20.

great enchanter of tradition, the episode that represents his failure to meet the responsibilities of kingship represents his failure of regal power as a failure of magical power.

By the same token, the assertion of wise and just lordship through which Math grows towards ideal kingship is also represented in terms of his traditional magical powers. He reclaims authority by displaying greater power than Gwydion has. The horses and hounds that Gwydion conjures from toadstools (*madalch*) turn back into toadstools after a brief interval, but when Math transforms his nephews into animals, the metamorphosis lasts until he intervenes again. Moreover, he shows himself to be kingly in his justice and compassion. Gwydion's magic was directed towards deception of Math and Pryderi, and towards fulfilling his own vain desire for enhanced status; it leads to violence and death. Math's magic punishes his nephews for that violence, but it leads to reconciliation and forgiveness (*tangneued . . . a cherennyd*).⁶⁷ Math's second display of the magical power for which he was widely known occurs when he requires Aranrhod to step over his magic wand, and so demonstrates that she is not, in fact, a virgin. Whatever else this incident is about, it serves to redeem Math's ignorance of Goewin's violated virginity. Gwydion's attempt to deceive him on this occasion — an attempt which may well be inadvertent — fails before Math's superior power.

The first move of the Fourth Branch comes to a close, and Math disappears from the story for a time, as it follows the adventures of Lleu. Yet those adventures represent to a great extent the ramifications of Math's early errors and of his attempts to redress them, and they lead in the end to a restoration of order in Gwynedd when Lleu succeeds his great-uncle. As I observed at the outset, the conclusion of the Fourth Branch,

a herwyd y dyweit y kyuarwydyt, ef a uu arglwyd wedy hynny ar Wyned⁶⁸
and according to tradition, he was lord of Gwynedd after that,

echoes its highly charged first sentence,

Math uab Mathonwy oed arglwyd ar Wyned,⁶⁹

Math son of Mathonwy was lord of Gwynedd,

and brings the tale to closure by completing a circle.

Our ignorance of the circumstances under which the Four Branches

⁶⁷PKM, p. 77; *Math*, edited by Ford, line 291; edited by Hughes, line 232. ⁶⁸PKM, p. 92; *Math*, edited by Ford, lines 747–94; edited by Hughes, lines 593–94. ⁶⁹PKM, p. 67; *Math*, edited by Ford, line 1; edited by Hughes, line 1.

were composed puts us at a considerable disadvantage in our efforts to make sense of them. We have good reason to believe, however, that they date from the period when the arrival and expansion of the Normans in England and Wales gave rise to enormous changes in the political landscape, when the traditional *brenhinoedd* 'kings' of Wales were gradually accepting the status of *tywysogion* 'princes' and *arglwyddi* 'lords', and when the emergence of certain powerful princes in both South and North created for a time the vision of a unified Wales. The entire period was one in which the conduct of lords was of potentially enormous consequence for themselves and the lands that they ruled. Our uncertainty about the date of the Four Branches is compounded by our inability to locate their composition securely or, by extension, to speculate with any real confidence on their author's identity. It has been suggested that they derive from Dyfed, that they derive from Gwynedd, and that they were composed in Dyfed by a Gwynedd author. It has been proposed that the author was a monk, a court cleric, a jurist, a *cyfarwydd*, a princess.⁷⁰

I have suggested in this essay that the Fourth Branch reflects certain attitudes to the status and dignity of the Welsh ruler, and of the importance of prudence in his dealings with other rulers and with his own courtiers. I would hesitate to go so far as to argue that the Four Branches were composed by lawyers. However, I would emphasize the oft-reiterated fact that there was a great deal of overlap among the learned classes in medieval Wales — lawyers, poets, *cyfarwyddiaid* — and between these masters of native learning and the religious houses in which their work was recorded in writing. It seems to me that several preoccupations of the Laws of Court, as Robin Chapman Stacey has seen them, pervade the Four Branches as well. These include her conviction that 'the Laws of Court remained a vehicle through which jurists expressed their thoughts on Welsh politics during the final centuries of native rule' and that 'their aim was not merely to reflect historical reality but actively to reshape it'.⁷¹ She also points to the resolutely native nature of the Welsh court as it is depicted in these Laws, their avoidance of all explicit reference to practice elsewhere in Europe or even, for the most part, to the relationship of the court to the Church.⁷² Finally, she argues that a narrative imagination informs the Laws of Court as often as does contemporary practice. In other words, the lawbooks seem not only to have arisen within the same political, social, and intellectual

milieu as did the Four Branches, but there may have been real and active influence of narrative tradition — *cyfarwyddyd* — upon the composition of the Laws: 'the links between lawyers and poets were close, and it is only to be expected that both lawbooks and tales would draw on the body of mythological perception common to them and then reshape this material for their own purposes'.⁷³ If the Laws of Court seek to present, in an idealized form, the ways in which a king, his *penteulu*, and his *troediog* (among others) ought to behave, then the story of Math, the lord of Gwynedd in the Fourth Branch, seeks to suggest what can go wrong when any of these persons behaves inappropriately. The resources of the native tradition are harnessed to the purpose of urging rulers to move carefully, prudently, and with dignity through the dangerous shoals of Cambro-Anglo-Norman politics.

⁷⁰Useful reviews of the debates about the place of origin and authorship of the *Mabinogi* are to be found in the following: Brynley F. Roberts, 'Where Were the Four Branches of the Mabinogi Written?', pp. 61–73; Davies, *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, pp. 13–16. As I do here, Sioned Davies makes a particular case for the link between the Four Branches and Welsh legal writing (pp. 15–16). ⁷¹King, Queen, and Edling in the Laws of Court', p. 31. ⁷²*ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷³*ibid.*, pp. 37–38.