'Medieval Bardic Paganism'? The Evidence of the Mabinogi

There is no doubt that the medieval author of the Four Branches would, like almost everyone else in medieval Europe, have considered himself to be a devout Christian. But it is equally clear that he also intensely preoccupied with pagan lore; and engaged in patterns of thought and forms of discourse that might be considered more characteristic of a druidic prophet than a Christian scribe. Such 'doublethink' was of course by no means unusual in the pre-modern age and there are parallels to be drawn with the lavish celebration of pagan antiquity we find in the artwork of Northern Italy during the early Renaissance. However, what would be interesting to know is how our author understood his own intellectual system: whether he was conscious of this 'paganism' as such; and in what way he would have perceived his differences with the wider consensus of the medieval Christian world. It is at this point in the study we consider whether this adds up to a belief-system we might think of as *medieval bardic paganism*.

It is a truism to say that more or less everything about the Mabinogi is rooted in the pre-Christian past. The name of the tradition itself, as we have seen, appears to derive from the name for the seasonal celebrations of the Romano-British boy-god, Apollo Maponus. A substantial number of its chief protagonists – notably Rhiannon, Manawydan, and Lleu – were clearly once worshipped as pagan divinities, whose medieval legends can be seen as a natural development from pre-Christian, druidic cult mysteries. Motifs such as the Living Head, the Chase of the White Stag (p. 178, n. 304) or the shadowy *Pen Annwfn*, can be seen to have their roots in a system of magico-religious thinking that might be described as Celtic, or (in some cases) specifically Brythonic in origin. This much is uncontroversial, as has been amply demonstrated on the pages above and elsewhere in the scholarly literature of the field. But what does it imply about the thought-world and belief system of the medieval author involved? If we can accept the Four Branches is euhemerised pagan myth, does this necessarily imply anything other than orthodox Christian belief on the part of its medieval author? In order to answer this question, we need to look beyond the miscellania of fossilised god-names and mythological motifs, and consider the logical texture of the Four Branches itself as a medieval literary expression.

In Chapter One we discussed various aspects of the medieval Welsh literary tradition, including its ambivalent relationship with the Christian church. It was proposed that the medieval Celtic learned class might be seen in terms of an ideological spectrum: with the Latinate 'reformists' at one end and the nativist 'radicals' at the other (pp. 66 etc.). From his evident inter-textual links with the School of Taliesin, as well as the subject matter of the Mabinogi itself, it is clear that the author was firmly positioned at the nativist end of this cultural spectrum. The Four Branches might be read, in some respects, as a stridently nationalistic manifesto, delivered in a high literary style but expressing a traditional world-view that was defiantly removed the Franco-Roman intellectual mainstream. However, it remains difficult to judge how self-conscious this philosophical nonconformity really might have been, and to what extent the author was aware (or even concerned) about his distance from the European Christian mainstream.

An example of what appears, at first sight at least, to be a statement of ontological heterodoxy is to be found in the Fourth Branch, in the episode in which Gwydion and Gilfaethwy were changed into a succession of animal forms as a punishment for the rape of Goewin. This, we may remember, resulted in them being embroiled in a bizarre sexual circus in which all three of the Levitical taboos of incest, sodomy and bestiality were systematically violated. Something of this kind seems to have

been already present in the mythological tradition (parallels have been noted with the parturating Loki from the Icelandic tradition). But particular emphasis seems to have been given to the fact that Math was able to impose on these unfortunate brothers not only the physical form but also the internal nature (anyan) of the animals involved in each case. We might remember also how Pwyll had ceased to be called by that name during his sojourn in Annwfn, being referred to instead simply as 'the man who was in the place of Arawn', while later on the same Branch Gwawl has his identity reduced to 'the man who was in the bag' (re: p. 245). Our medieval author was quite definite in his conviction that a person's essence was identical with his body, his name and his appearance, and these were all properties that were mutable and subject to change. This was in direct defiance of the clearly stated theological tenet that God alone has the power to alter the essence or categorical substance of creation.

As we have suggested above, the ontological heterodoxy of our medieval author appears all the more significant against the background of the theological climate of the late twelfth century, in which the Latinate intelligensia (representing the Franco-Roman mainstream) were becoming increasingly alarmed at the proliferation of lurid tales involving hybrids, lycanthropes and shape-changing episodes precisely of the kind depicted in the Fourth Branch. For these authorities, the very suggestion that man's rational nature (which they considered to be the *Imaginem Dei* – the image of God) could be altered by any other agency than the Creator himself, was nothing less than a reprehensible heresy. Against this background, is it not significant that our medieval author should go out of his way to represent a druidic wizard usurping this Divine prerogative? It is tempting to read this as a calculated insult to the symbolic order of the Franco-Roman world, as represented by these theological nostrums.

But whether or not there was a deliberate intent to offend the Aristotelian orthodoxy of the Franco-Roman mainstream by emphasising the grotesque or heretical aspects of the punishment of the sons of Dôn,[1132] zoomorphic transformations in themselves were by no means incongruous within the native mythological system. Indeed, as we have seen, this incident is far from unique within the Mabinogi. The same process is being represented with the equine regression of Rhiannon, or with the transformation of the 'bird man' Lleu. Similar transformations proliferate elsewhere throughout Medieval Celtic literature, as we have seen (e.g. pp. 98). The same idea is echoed in the Gallo-Brittonic sacred iconography: in the repeated representations of 'the horned god' for example, or the prominent appearance of zoomorphic attributes (birds, horses, snakes etc.) associated with particular categories of divinity. This is rooted, as we have suggested, in an essentially pagan view of nature, in which man and beast existed on a *psycho-physical continuum*. One being might slide into the form of another through some magical transformative experience, often associated with profound emotional trauma. We find the same sensibility expressed poetically in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as in countless totemistic myths from the pre-literate world.

Related to this, we might recall the *doctrine of the avatar*, which we considered in Chapter 5 in connection with the mysterious conception of the hero Lleu Llaw Gyffes. Here too there are signs of a markedly archaic conceptual system, which might be regarded as an inheritance of the pre-

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1132 Millersdaughter (2002) has suggested that this might be even represent 'a cultural counterstance to English representations of incest against the native Welsh' and 'a reversal of the Levitical rhetoric' in which this bizarre incest ordeal may have been represented as both a punishment and a rite of political subjectification. However, we need to also bear in the probability that the satirical aspects of this episode may well have had the more local, political purpose of diminishing the profile of some of Llywelyn ap Iorwerth's dynastic rivals.

Christian thought-world – a possibility that is strengthened by the appearance of a similar (and equally mysterious) set of circumstances in the Irish story of the birth of Cú Chulainn (see pp. 491-494). Both of these medieval Celtic legends represent the conception of the hero arising out of a confluence of shadowy circumstances, including a death and a possible transmigration, rumours of brother-sister incest, and the apparent involvement of otherworld agencies. It is not made clear precisely which of these factors is the causal agent in the conception; instead, a rather more complex *polygenetic* process is implied. These are not so much causes as *attendant* circumstances which accompany the conception of a hero according to this traditional aetiology.

This kind of associative, multi-tiered causality defines the narrative texture of the Four Branches. We are never told exactly why, for example, both the infant Pryderi and the horses of Teyrnon are seized by the mysterious 'monster hand' at midnight on the calends of May. But somehow we are left with the distinct sense of an encroaching menace, some kind of shadow falling over the South. But although these dangers are represented as essentially emanating from without, from the Otherworld, they are also simultaneously linked with the behaviour of some the leading men and women of the House of Dyfed (pp. 438 etc.). The ritualistic punishment of Gwawl in Rhiannon's magic bag in particular seems to reverberate with extraordinary effect throughout the first three Branches, for reasons that remain far from clear. Its symbolic relationship with a number of events in the Second Branch (e.g. the 'men in bags' incident) is apparent, even if this defies rational explanation (p. 428-429). The enchantment of Dyfed in the Third Branch is explained in terms of this incident (revenge on behalf of an ally of the victim), but this explanation, for a number of reasons, is stripped of all internal probability (p. 422). Again, it appears more like an attendant circumstance than a definitive causal explanation.

It is our modern-day preference for linear causal explanation that makes traditional Celtic narrative discourse so problematic for the contemporary reader. The failure to recognise the associative, polygenetic logical system, may well account for the considerable bewilderment that has characterised the modern reception of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi (variously described as 'muddled' 'inconsequential' 'poorly synthesised' etc. However, when it is understood in its own terms, it becomes apparent that Four Branches reveals itself to be a tightly structured and competently executed work: in which tribal history and cult legend are successfully brought to bear on a range of contemporary medieval concerns. The logic is associative and inferential: tracing patterns rather than disclosing explanations. But it is the sense of the past serving as a map to the present, predicated as it is on a homoeostatic, cyclic view of time, which perhaps most defines the orientation of the conceptual system out of which this is a literary expression.

Regarding conceptual complexes such as 'the doctrine of the avatar', 'the cyclic view of time' or (if we might put it thus) 'psycho-somatic lycanthropy' as legacies from an earlier, pre-Christian worldview is unproblematic enough in itself. But even then, it is still unclear whether we can properly conclude the existence of some kind of residual 'medieval paganism'. Perhaps the best way of grappling with this paradox is to conclude that the author would have certainly thought of himself as Christian, but that the form of Christianity to which he adhered was so conflated with material of pre-Christian origin that it would have effectively represented a different religious system altogether, particularly from the point of view of the Franco-Roman centre. In this respect, comparisons might perhaps be made with the Santiera or Voodoo folk-religions of the Caribbean, in which an omnipotent if remote Christian deity is acknowledged, while the pre-Christian gods live on through a myriad of

saints' cults and ancestral *loas*. In the domestic mythology of the Four Branches, protagonists such as Rhiannon, Manawydan and Lleu were recognised not so much as gods as such, but rather as formative archetypes, whose actions and characteristics would be echoed down the generations. These beings would have certainly have 'existed' for the author, but as moulds or casts for future generations.

The world of triple deities, totemic ancestors and underworld spirits hinted at in the Iron Age religious archaeology of these islands has now long since passed away. We must accept that its inner mysteries are more or less consigned to oblivion. By its nature, the evidence involved is mute, inferential and inherently obscure. However, there is a body of medieval texts from a certain stratum of the performative, poetic tradition (in the Irish and Welsh traditions alike) which exhibits a sufficient number of distinctly Celtic archaisms for us to assume that it was rooted in a similar mythopoeic system as that we find expressed by the ancient archaeology. The Welsh word *hanes*, meaning 'story' or 'mystery' (what his Iron Age ancestors would have known as **sani-stô*) literally means 'derivation' 'emanation' or 'descent': an interesting idiom for the definition of the complex interrelationship between present and the ancestral past; between the worlds of man, god and nature. It is this ancient and perennial mythopoeia that was given ingenious literary expression in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi.