

CONCLUSION – A COMPLEX TALE

It is impossible not to be struck by the extreme dislocation of societal and ontological norms represented in this final Branch of the Mabinogi. Even seasoned medievalists such as Sarah Higley, Jeffrey Gantz and the Mabinogi expert Andrew Welsh have used adjectives such as ‘nightmareish’, ‘bizarre’, ‘negative’ and ‘perplexing’ to define the uncanny atmosphere which is present within the Fourth Branch. The subjects of rape, incest, bestiality and lycanthropy would have been no less disturbing to medieval audiences than they are to a readership of today. This narrative was intended to shock and we can assume that it set out to do so for a reason.

In this chapter we have offered a number of explanations for the curious lineaments of the Fourth Branch. We have seen that a substantial proportion of its phantasmagoric content was actually present from an early stage in the story’s evolution. This is most clearly evident in a comparison between the Welsh, Irish and Icelandic mythological traditions, where a coincidence of name-elements (e.g. Loki:Lug, Balor:Baldur, Gwydion:Woden etc.) and certain distinctive narrative structures suggest a common origin in some kind of early North European variant of the King and His Prophesied Death scenario (p. 477 ff.).¹⁰³⁹ The freakish punishment of the sons of Dôn has a counterpart in the corresponding Icelandic tradition – suggesting even this combination of gender-change and bestiality was a feature of the original myth, not simply a product of the lurid imagination of the medieval storyteller.

We have also seen that the tribal-historic tradition of the *cyfarwyddyd* (fused indistinguishably with this mythological material) must have contributed to the content of the Fourth Branch, notably in the depiction of the dynasty of Dôn as a medial, transitional element between the Indigenous Underworld on one hand, and the final wave of conquering settlers represented by the Sons of Beli Mawr. There may even be a specific correspondence between medieval legend and prehistoric reality in the sequence of the ‘pig wars’, which (it has been suggested) may correspond to the settlement of the pig-raising economy by the incoming Bell-Beaker peoples in the British Isles, around the middle of the third millennium BC (p. 459 ff.).

As important as these traditional sources were to the formation of the Fourth Branch, it is also quite clear that the socio-political realities of medieval Gwynedd played a part in determining the form and content of this Caernarvonshire tale. Gwynedd in the late-twelfth century was essentially a society in crisis – and it was the intensity of this crisis that perhaps best explains the uncompromising nature of the Fourth Branch. This was a social world which had endured thirty years of civil war, and (it would seem) had witnessed some shocking acts of dynastic violence committed by the rival factions of its feuding royal caste. At the same time, it was menaced by an aggressive presence from

1039 The Fourth Branch represents the ‘Birth and Early Life of the Hero’ stage of this prehistoric meta-myth. The climax of this cycle would appear to be the *theomachy* or Battle of the Gods – represented in the Irish tradition by *Cath Mag Tuired*, in Wales by the *Cad Goddeu* and in the Norse tradition by the visions of Ragnorok described in *Völuspá* and other early sources.

beyond its borders: the hostile Angevin Empire, the capabilities of which had been most recently demonstrated in Henry II's invasion of Ireland. The accusations of incest and religious malpractice which had preceded this bloodthirsty colonial adventure were starting to be heard again at the Angevin court, this time directed at the native Welsh. It was against this background of cultural bullying from without and political fragmentation from within, that the Fourth Branch appears to have been drafted as the definitive conclusion of the Mabinogi as a whole.

The dynastic-political agenda of the tale – the practical response to this state of near-collapse – have been amply discussed in the sections above. But a word or two remains to be said about what we have been referring to as the 'irrational' stratum of this final Branch. In chapters one and two, we discussed the functionality of the magical narrative: its manifestation as a response to a state of internal crisis in a psychic environment in which the subject-object distinction was altogether more fluid and precarious than we think of them today. Historical and anthropological data suggests that these internal, introspective anxieties were often both experienced and articulated on a communal basis in pre-modern social contexts – resulting in the description of that distinctive magical universe which is so difficult for the atomised, empirical consciousness of the modern reader to comprehend.¹⁰³¹ The Fourth Branch, the most localised and 'close to the bone' of the Mabinogi quartet, exhibits the characteristics of a magical tale more clearly than the preceding three Branches. In the dream-like language of liminal consciousness, it recreates a powerfully affective narrative sequence culminating in a purifying exorcism followed by redemptive regeneration – the essential goals of the magical narrative as defined on pp. 113 above.

If the Fourth Branch in isolation reveals its magical provenance, then it is in relation to the superstructure of the Mabinogi as a whole that the tale of Math reveals its functional artistry. We have seen how the Fourth Branch makes eloquent use of a complex elaborate symbol-system which has been developed incrementally throughout the Mabinogi, thus deepening and enriching the significance of the magical drama. The climax of this drama sees the hero Lleu undergoing an ordeal of self-immolation, hanging on the branches of the Upland Oak while the pig feeds on his disembodied flesh. There are clear affiliations here with ancient tradition of shamanic ecstasy, as well as the more specifically druidic complex of the Oak-Mistletoe-Lightning God cult (see pp. 494-498, and 563-564). But even outside the context of these archaic hierophanies, this image retains its force as a powerful symbol of death with the promise of regeneration. The pig, with its connections the indigenous underworld of *Annwfn*, points back to events in the First and Third Branches, and through them to the larger scale developments represented in the Second Branch. The image thus effects a resolution not just of the Fourth Branch, but also of the Mabinogi as a whole. As such, it can be seen to have performed a restorative function on the consciousness of its primary audience, allowing them to divest themselves of this body of highly-charged material in preparation for the moment of psychic rebirth, just as the Eagle-Lleu sheds his flesh into the jaws of the chthonic sow at the base of the tree.

1040 c.f. pp. 108-109 above.

Critics of this text have identified within the Fourth Branch ‘a tale of ethical judgement and moral enquiry’. There is a sense in which this is undoubtedly true, both for the Mabinogi as a whole and this final Branch in particular. The story is based around a series of transgressions with a clinical analysis of the ensuing disruption. The wrong-doers might always be brought to task, but the text in no way elides the suffering of the innocent. This is, like all tragedies, a meditation on the cruelties of destiny and the attempt by the human subject (embodied by the hero) to find a means of self-actualisation. Earlier on, in Chapter 3, we quoted Andrew Welsh’s definitive observation of the ‘the webs of honour and vengeance woven by unseen hands into the fabric of the whole culture’ which propelled the narrative of the Second Branch. The concern of the Fourth Branch in particular and the Mabinogi as whole is with the more general problem of the impact of past transgressions on present-day lives. These ‘sins of the past’ manifest in the inscrutable hostility of the Vengeful Mother Aranrhod towards her unwanted offspring, Llew Llaw Gyffes. Llew himself might be innocent of whatever transgression it was that provoked his mother’s fury, but he is nonetheless the target of her revenge, just as Pryderi bore the sins of his father, or the unfortunate young Gwern was killed in an inter-tribal conflict which had begun even before he was born. It is not hard to see that the author is presenting these events as an affliction of the human condition, made worse by the fact that the primary factors involved in their perpetuation were more often than not the banal weaknesses of greed, lust and pride. An Otherworld source may have been implied for the original sin but the circumstances of its transmission were all too human.

But beyond these evident moral implications there is much in the Fourth Branch that evades, teases and ultimately defies definition. As Andrew Welsh put it in his ground-breaking study of the Fourth Branch ‘the intentions of the author and the shape of his meaning remain possessed of fundamental obscurities ... which may ultimately be irresolvable’. We have noted typological parallels with events in twelfth-century Gwynedd which are suggestive of a dynastic-political significance; and following the recent observations of Katherine Millersdaughter we can also see how the treatment of incest in the Fourth Branch can be understood as a reflex of cultural self-defence against the hegemonic threats of Angevin empire. With these new perspectives, and a clearer view of the history of the tradition itself, our understanding of this dark and complex tale now perhaps goes deeper than it might have done when Andrew Welsh was writing over ten years ago. But there are still questions that need to be answered. As Sarah Higley puts it:

As we read this story across the gulf of centuries, we wonder about its emphases. We as readers want to know what importance attaches to this passive and slightly stupid Llew Llaw Gyffes, and whether Gwydion’s behaviour is admirable, despicable, comical or neutral. “The Fourth Branch” does not indulge us with *apologiae*.¹⁰⁴¹

1041 ‘Dirty Magic’ (1994) p. 141

‘Passive and slightly stupid’ may seem a strange way to describe the hero of the Fourth Branch, who was evidently also the typological correlate of the future king Llywelyn ap Iorwerth. But it can scarcely be denied that there are certainly moments within the Fourth Branch when such a characterisation of Lleu would appear to have been part of the author’s deliberate literary intention (e.g. pp. 561). However, this discreet mockery of the character supposedly carrying the political weight of the Branches on his youthful shoulders should perhaps not surprise us. With the possible exception of Bendigeidfran son of Llŷr, there is barely a single significant male character in the Mabinogi that entirely escapes being lampooned as either stupid, impulsive, psychopathic or merely weak and indecisive. Interestingly, perhaps, it is the female characters (notably Rhiannon, Branwen and in the Fourth Branch Aranrhod) who emerge with their dignity (if not their power) unimpaired.

The satirical aspect of the Mabinogi is a feature that deserves more considered scholarly attention. A subversive treatment of these mythological figures (and through them, a generalised mockery of the contemporary warrior elite) may have been an early feature of the **Maponakji* tradition, the recitation of which might have originally been accompanied by more generalised seasonal carousals with the *Saturnalia* of Ancient Rome or the Eppida of Ancient Greece. Something of the same spirit lives on today, of course, in the combination of mischief-making and superstition enacted on Hallowe’en (which, by no coincidence, falls on the same night as Samain, the Old Celtic New Year).

However, there is surely something rather more than the atavistic carnival spirit underlying the subtle irreverence which pervades the Mabinogi. We have also seen plenty of evidence of the pedantic antiquarianism of the *cyfarwydd* tradition; the archaistic regression of the magical narrative; and the propagandistic use of the typological innuendo – all of which would coexisted alongside this attitude of knowing irreverence. The cohesion of these diverse and seemingly contradictory intentions is one of the most revealing aspects of the cultural consciousness represented by this curious medieval work. What this tells us about the audience-community, and indeed the cultural significance of the Mabinogi tradition itself, is a question we will attempt to answer in the chapter to come.