



Politics and the Four Branches of the Mabinogi

Andrew Breeze

Universidad de Navarra

In the present writer's *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin, 1997), it is argued that Princess Gwenllian (c. 1098-1136) of Gwynedd and Dyfed was the author of the Welsh prose classic, the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. If this view is correct (and no evidence has yet been brought forward to disprove it), then this discovery will shed new light on Wales in the late 1120s, when the tales were apparently written. What follows here, therefore, analyses the *Four Branches* for the information they provide on the Welsh politics of the early twelfth century¹.

The daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan (d. 1137), king of Gwynedd, Princess Gwenllian was wife to prince Gruffydd ap Rhys (d. 1137) of Dyfed and mother of the Lord Rhys (d. 1197). Her stories tell us much about Welsh society. Unfortunately, the *Four Branches* have usually been regarded as no more than romances, so that even Sir John Lloyd could refer merely to their 'fancy and patriotic fervour and wistful love of the past'². Hence even recent historians fail to exploit these stories for information on politics in Wales as perceived by a member of the Welsh society³. It must be stressed that on this subject the *Four Branches* can be intensely political and very realistic. It would be no paradox to say that at times this collection of romances reads more like a handbook for politicians. Hence they

¹ A. C. BREEZE, *Medieval Welsh Literature*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1997, pp.75-79, and 'Did a Woman Write the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*?' in *Studi Medievali*, XXXVIII, 1997, pp. 679-705.

² J. E. LLOYD, *A History of Wales*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1911, p. 692.

³ Wendy DAVIES, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1982, pp. 211-212.



provide material of the greatest value for historians of Welsh government in the early middle ages.

The politics of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* has five main aspects: (a) the machinery of government, particularly as regards diplomacy and warfare; (b) the working of native law; (c) the policy of 'Dyfed expansionism'; (d) the constitutional status of Britain; and (e) the ethos of the tales as narratives of the reign of Henry I, when the Welsh suffered from the ascendancy of the English state. What follows comments on these points as revealed by a reading of the *Four Branches*. It is hoped readers of this article will be able to go through the following analysis with a text of the *Four Branches* at hand or a copy of *Medieval Welsh Literature*, where a summary of the tales is given in chapter three. If this exercise in close reading is carried out, it will be seen that the *Four Branches* reflect very well the experience of government and politics we would expect a Welsh princess of the early twelfth century to have.

1. *The First Branch: The Tale of Pwyll Prince of Dyfed*

The tales open with a statement of royal status and power: 'Pwyll prince (*pendeuig*) of Dyfed was lord (*arglwyd*) over the seven cantrefs of Dyfed'⁴. When Pwyll meets Arawn king of Annwn, their conversation is governed by the protocol of status. Arawn refuses to greet Pwyll, though not because of his own dignity (*anryded* 'honour'), despite the fact that he would be within his rights to do so, since he is a crowned king (*brenhin corunawc*) and Pwyll merely a prince. Pwyll offers to redeem Arawn's friendship according to Arawn's dignity⁵. Plainly, whoever wrote this passage was sharply aware of distinctions of rank and was familiar with the Welsh law of compensation. The same familiarity with Welsh law appears in Pwyll's combat with Hafgan, where a horseman declares publicly that each is a claimant for land and territory (*tir a dayar*), reproducing a

⁴ Gwyn JONES - Thomas JONES (trad.), *The Mabinogion*, London, 1949, p. 3; R. L. THOMSON (ed.), *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet*, Dublin, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957, p.1; *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography* London, Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, 1959, p. XXI (for a map of Dyfed).

⁵ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 4; R. L. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 2.



legal phrase figuring in legal texts, including the 'privilege' of Teilo in the twelfth-century Book of Llandaff⁶. When Pwyll vanquishes

Hafgan, he bids his followers take guidance (*kyuarwyd*) as to who his vassals may be. In this passage he claims authority using legal forms, *cyfarwydd* here being a technical expression paralleled in ninth-century Welsh⁷. From the very beginning, then, the author of the *Four Branches* shows a close knowledge of the terms of Welsh government, precedence, and law.

Other aspects of government apart from the merely legal appear in the *Four Branches*. Even in casual phrases, the author of the *Four Branches* is revealed as one who sees the world from a position of power, and who is familiar with the responsibilities of power. Before Pwyll's encounter with Hafgan, for example, we are told that 'the tryst (*oed*) was as well remembered by the man who dwelt furthest in the whole kingdom as by himself'⁸. Whoever wrote that phrase thought naturally in terms of political dominion. Again, when Pwyll returns to Dyfed after a year's absence, he learns that his nobles (*gwyrda*) have been ruled with discernment, amity, and generosity in giving⁹. The conversation between Pwyll and his nobles (written from the point of view of the ruler, not the ruled) suggests a writer experienced in such matters. Many other such passages could be quoted. In all of them, events are described from the viewpoint of somebody accustomed to rule, to be obeyed, but also to have to negotiate with individuals of high rank. The kingship depicted in the *Four Branches* demanded leadership, but also recognized the need for consultation with vassals, as we shall see. It was neither absolute nor tyrannical.

⁶ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 6; R. L. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5, 28; *cfr.* Wendy DAVIES, *Patterns of Power in Early Wales*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990, pp. 82-83.

⁷ Ifor WILLIAMS (ed.), *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, Caerdydd, Gwarg Pri-fisgol Cymru, 1930, p. 111; Dafydd JENKINS and Morfydd OWEN, 'The Welsh Marginalia in the Lichfield Gospels', in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, V, 1983, pp. 37-66, at pp. 53-54.

⁸ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 6; R. L. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p.4.

⁹ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 8; R. L. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p.7.



This appears when Pwyll and Rhiannon, after three years of marriage, are still childless. The Dyfed nobility pressurize Pwyll to divorce Rhiannon and remarry. Pwyll is closely related to them by the bonds of fosterage: 'the men of the land (*gwyr y wlad*) began to feel heaviness of heart at seeing a man whom they loved as much as their lord and foster-brother without offspring'. Yet they can be formidable. They tell him frankly that he will not last for ever, and that though he might desire to remain thus, they will not suffer it from him. Pwyll asks for a year's respite, after which he will submit to their counsel¹⁰. Rhiannon must, therefore, produce a child in that year, or be divorced. This passage thus provides remarkable evidence for the pressure the nobles of Dyfed might bring on their ruler, as also for the vulnerability of a childless alien queen. Similarly, when a political crisis erupts after Rhiannon is thought to have murdered her newborn baby, the chief men (*gyrda*) of Dyfed make representation to Pwyll, requesting him to divorce his wife for this alleged crime. He compromises with them by letting her do penance instead¹¹.

Other political aspects of the first branch of the *Mabinogi* may be dealt with briefly. The writer refers casually to the fact that Teyrnion had been Pwyll's vassal (*gwr*). When Teyrnion reaches Arberth (now a tiny place two miles east of Cardigan), Pwyll is said to have just arrived from making a progress (*cylchaw*) through Dyfed. How Pwyll and his guests sat at table is described with care, showing the writer's attention to protocol. Finally, the tales end describing a Greater Dyfed, of how after Pwyll's death his son Pryderi conquered the three cantrefs of Ystrad Tywi (Gower and east Carmarthenshire) and four cantrefs of Ceredigion (Cardiganshire), the seven being called Seisyllwch, after the eighth-century ruler Seisyll¹². It has been pointed out that the Welsh laws, of which the oldest copy (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 28) dates from the late twelfth century, make no reference to the ruler making progresses in person¹³. Since we date the *Four Branches* to 1128 or thereabouts, it is

¹⁰ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18; R. L. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

¹¹ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 19; R. L. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹² G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, pp. 21, 22, 24; R. L. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 21, 22, 23.

¹³ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p. 156; R. L. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.



probable that this practice was already obsolete by the time Gwenllian described it, though possibly not long obsolete, since she was still aware of it. As for Ystrad Tywi, we have argued that it was there that the *Four Branches* were written, in Cantref Mawr (the region between Lampeter and Llandeilo), where Gwenllian lived after her marriage; while Seisyll was an ancestor of her husband Gruffydd ap Rhys, who descended from him via Angharad, wife of Rhodri Mawr (d. 877)¹⁴. Sir John Lloyd expressed surprise that the *Four Branches* should allude to Seisyll. 'A very unlikely source, to wit, the romance of Pwyll, chieftain of Dyfed, tells us that the combined realm of Ystrad Tywi and Ceredigion bore the name of Seisyllwg'¹⁵. But if, as we argue, the *Four Branches* were written by one who had married a descendant of Seisyll, the circumstance is less surprising.

The first of the *Four Branches*, then, provides material for its author's knowledge of royal government and Welsh law, as also for her familiarity with court life and her husband's claims to dominion over the whole of West Wales, including the whole modern county of Dyfed and the area west of modern Swansea.

2. The Second Branch: The Tale of Princess Branwen

The second of the *Four Branches* contains more political material than the other three, and includes an Irish dimension which reveals something about medieval Welsh diplomacy. The opening line of the tale emphasizes the royal status of Branwen's brother, Bendigeidran, as 'crowned king (*brenhin coronawc*) over this Island and exalted with the crown of London'¹⁶. His status of ruler of Gwynedd was therefore that of king, like Gwenllian's own father, Gruffudd ap Cynan, just as Pwyll's status in south-west Wales was that of prince, like Gwenllian's husband, Gruffydd ap Rhys. (If Gwenllian wrote the *Four Branches*, it would be natural for her to base the hero of the first branch on her husband, and the hero of the second branch on her

¹⁴ P. C. BARTRUM (ed.), *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts*, Cardiff, Wales University Press, 1966, p. 49.

¹⁵ J. E. LLOYD, *The Story of Ceredigion*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press Board, 1937, p. 12.

¹⁶ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 25; D. S. THOMSON (ed.), *Branwen Uerch Lyr*, Dublin, Institute for Advanced Studies, 1961, p. 1.



father.) When king Matholwch of Ireland comes to the royal court at Harddlech (Harlech, in Gwynedd) to seek Branwen's hand, Bendigeidfran takes counsel on the matter, since the marriage is a matter of state. Matholwch desires Branwen because he wishes to ally himself with Bendigeidfran, in order to unite Britain with Ireland and thereby strengthen them. Although we are later told that Branwen was the fairest maiden in the world, this is not an official reason for the marriage¹⁷. The dynastic reasons for the marriage are explicit. Romance has little to do with it. It is difficult to believe this does not reflect Gwenllïan's experience of marriage and politics, for her own marriage to Gruffydd ap Rhys had a vital politic function, in strengthening Wales against aggressors. At the wedding feast at Aberffraw, the seating plan is carefully described: Manawydan on one side of Bendigeidfran, Matholwch on the other, and Branwen next to him¹⁸.

However, matters turn sour following the mutilation of Matholwch's horses by Efnisien 'the quarrelsome man we spoke of above' (for *uchot* 'above' here, indicating the author's visualization of an original written text for the *Four Branches*, cf. 'as we have described above' in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 1090). The diplomatic crisis which Efnisien causes is described realistically. Bendigeidfran's messengers explain that Matholwch was insulted neither with the assent of him who had authority at court (*a uedei y llys*) nor that of any of his council (*na neb o'e kynghor*). But Matholwch is still far from mollified. Bendigeidfran appraises the situation with remarkable objectivity. He says, 'It is not to our advantage (*nyt oes ymwarded*) that he go away in enmity, and we will not let him go'¹⁹. Although Bendigeidfran desires good relations with the Irish, he knows he has power over them while they are in Wales, because they cannot leave against his will. He offers compensation in terms of the honour-price stipulated by Welsh law. Matholwch shall have a sound horse for each one mutilated, a silver staff as thick as his little finger and as tall as himself, and a gold plate broad as his face.

¹⁷ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 26; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁸ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 26; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁹ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 28; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 4.



The author's familiarity with the Welsh law of honour-price (*wynebwerth*) or compensation for insult is clear enough. Less obvious is the insight into political processes and decision-making revealed in the reaction of the Irish. We are told that they took counsel. They concluded that, if they rejected Bendigeidran's terms, they were more likely to get greater shame than greater reparation. They thus accept the terms offered²⁰.

The author's knowledge of diplomatic processes as indicated by the affair of Matholwch's horses indicates a strong political sensibility. This is entirely consistent with the attribution on other grounds of the *Four Branches* to Gwenllian, daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan, a Welsh king of Irish descent who had vast experience of Irish affairs.

Political experience appears yet again in Matholwch's evening anecdote of the giant Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid. As in *Gulliver's Travels* (another fantasy written by an individual of great political experience), giants are a problem for the government. Matholwch had agreed to maintain Llasar and his wife, but they provoke a crisis when they commit outrage on his subjects. Matholwch's people rise, giving him a choice: the giants go or he does. He refers the problem to a council. Because the giants will not go voluntarily, and cannot be forced out, the council devise an imaginative solution: a secret weapon, in the form of an iron chamber in which the giants can be destroyed. This works. The giants are either destroyed, or expelled from Ireland into Wales²¹. It is probable that the author of the *Four Branches* used the Irish tale *Mesca Ulad* 'The Intoxication of the Ulstermen' as a source, since the Book of Leinster version of the tale dates from the early twelfth century, when (we argue) the *Four Branches* were written²². But three other things are also worth note in this story: the realism of the political processes involved in this crisis; the turbulence of popular feeling, a headache for rulers in the *Four*

²⁰ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 28-29; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²¹ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-31; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

²² Proinsias MaC CANA, *Branwen Daughter of Llyr*, Cardiff, Wales University Press, 1958, pp. 16-23; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, pp. XXXVI-XL.



Branches; and the importance allotted here to the royal council, which acts both as a formulator of policy and as a think tank. All three cast an interesting light on the nature of rule in Celtic society. The strength of the subject as a factor in government, and the importance of the council in decision making, show Celtic kingship as a less than absolute thing. If the *Four Branches* were written by one within the royal circle, this stress on royal rule as a more problematic and vulnerable thing than might be imagined might be no surprise. Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown, etc. A further curious parallel between history and fiction comes in Bendigeidfran's comment on these Irish giants, 'I quartered them everywhere in my domain (*kyuoeth*), and they are numerous and prosper everywhere, and fortify whatever place they happen to be in with men and arms, the best that any one has seen'²³. Why does the author make this curious remark? It is normally explained as a reference to the post-Roman settlements of the Irish in Lleyn, though Mac Cana remarks that 'its exact significance for eleventh-century Wales is by no means clear'²⁴. However, a reference in the life of Gruffudd ap Cynan clarifies matters here. When he conquered Gwynedd in 1075, he billeted many of his Irish or Norse-Irish followers on his people. These alien fighting men were soon unpopular. One night, 52 of them were murdered in their beds in Lleyn, a signal for a revolt against Gruffudd²⁵. The strange reference to Bendigeidfran's quartering of Irish warriors in his realm echoes the policy of Gruffudd ap Cynan. It will be noted that the storyteller makes no criticism of it, though any reader might have thought the giants would cause trouble in Wales, just as they did in Ireland. It can hardly be doubted that the allusion to Irish settlements in Gwynedd thus has more to do with 1075 than with any memory of events in the fifth century. Since, as we argue, the reference was written by Gruffudd ap Cynan's daughter, it will be seen that she implicitly defends her father's policy.

²³ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 31; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²⁴ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p. 185; P. MaC CANA, *op. cit.*, p. 6, n. 1; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

²⁵ J. E. LLOYD, *A History of Wales*, p. 382; *Dictionary...*, p. 310; D. Simon EVANS (ed.), *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*, Caerdydd, University of Wales, 1977, p. 10.



The same unusual stress on royal weakness before popular discontent (or reluctance to criticize a monarch?) appears in the tale of Branwen's humiliation in Ireland. Matholwch puts her away and forces her to work in the kitchen, not because of his own feelings, but because of his people's 'murmuring' against her, and the taunts of his foster-brothers and men about him, all leading to an uprising (*dygyuor*) which threatened to depose him²⁶. Of course, although the author of *Four Branches* represents great pressure being put on both Pwyll and Matholwch by their subjects, Pwyll is better at handling the situation than Matholwch is. Matholwch agrees to put away Branwen: Pwyll refuses to put away Rhiannon. (Even Pwyll, however, has to compromise on the matter of penance.)

Nevertheless, resolute leadership is conspicuous when Bendigeidfran hears of his sister's humiliation. The whole passage reveals twelfth-century Welsh government in action. We cannot rule out the possibility that Bendigeidfran in this resembles Gwenllian's father Gruffudd ap Cynan, a king notable for decisiveness, including (in 1081) a successful invasion of Wales from Ireland²⁷. (We may note that, although critics like Morfudd Owen stress Branwen's vulnerability and powerlessness, a woman who can summon a navy to her aid is hardly as vulnerable and powerless as other women.) When Bendigeidfran hears of Branwen's distress, he acts. He at once sends messengers from Caernarfon to muster all Britain. When the levy of the 154 districts arrives, he addresses them, complaining of the affliction on his sister. They then take counsel. They decide to invade Ireland, leaving seven men as overlords (*tywysogyon*) over Britain, these men acting as stewards (*kynueissait*), with Bran's son Cradawg as their chief steward²⁸.

Two points are worth making here. First, Ifor Williams suggested that the 154 districts of Britain correspond to the 156 cantrefs and commots of Wales as recorded from an early source in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 163, written in 1543 by Gruffydd Hiraethog, bard and herald. The author of the *Four*

²⁶ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 32; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p.8.

²⁷ *Dictionary...*, p. 310.

²⁸ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p.9.



Branches was certainly familiar with the district (*gwlad*), cantref, and commot (*cymwt*) as administrative regions of Wales²⁹. It is thought these units took their final form about 1100³⁰. The implication is that the writer, who refers to the commots of Anglesey, the cantrefs of Dyfed, the commot of Mochnant in Powys, and so on, was familiar with the administration of Wales, and thought that Celtic Britain had been divided into the same number of districts, used for mustering troops. It will be seen that the author's knowledge of the administrative machinery by which war was waged in early Wales, and the steps taken for government in the absence of the ruler, is exact and factual. This circumstance is consistent with an attribution to Princess Gwenllïan.

Second, it will be noted that Bendigeidfran in Gwynedd seems to have more power at his disposal, and suffer less opposition from his nobles, than Pwyll does in Dyfed. This may reflect more than just the difference between the ruler of the Island of the Mighty (Britain) and the ruler of Dyfed. The nobility of Dyfed were notably less docile than the nobility of Gwynedd. A. H. Williams described the *gwyrd* of *Deheubarth* or southern Wales as challengers of royal authority, 'tenacious' of their rights, 'often ready' to declare that the king had acted wrongly or oppressively³¹. In the light of Williams's analysis (written, of course, without reference to the *Four Branches*), we understand better why Pwyll's subjects could summon him to an assembly at Preseli in the hills of Dyfed, and speak to him so boldly, declaring 'Thou wilt not last for ever, and though thou desire to remain thus, we will not suffer it from thee'³². If the *Four Branches* were written by Gwenllïan, she would be in a position to contrast the political climate of her own Gwynedd with the more turbulent one of West Wales. In this, her husband Gruffydd ap Rhys would resemble Pwyll as her father Gruffudd ap Cynan resembled Bendigeidfran.

Bendigeidfran and his army overcome anti-invasion devices planted by the Irish (magnets at the bottom of the Liffey, which suck

²⁹ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p. 191; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

³⁰ Wendy DAVIES, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 235-236.

³¹ A. H. WILLIAMS, *An Introduction to the History of Wales: Prehistoric Times to 1063*, Cardiff, 1941, p. 140.

³² G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 17.



ships down). The Irish then sue for peace. The account of the negotiations makes fascinating reading. They reveal certain perennial perceptions of Ireland. With a British army on Irish soil, the author implies the Irish must admit defeat. Messengers come to Bendigeidfran with Matholwch's greetings, 'showing how through his good will nothing but good should come his way'. Matholwch is to give the kingship of Ireland to Branwen's son, Gwern, who is to be invested in Bendigeidfran's presence. (The word used is *ystynnu* 'extend, reach out', used in Welsh law in the sense 'present, confer'.) Bendigeidfran demands better terms. Matholwch's council then tell him to build Bendigeidfran a house, place his kingship in Bendigeidfran's gift, and do him homage (*gwra idaw*). After taking counsel, like a good constitutional monarch, Bendigeidfran accepts these terms. The writer does not neglect to inform us of a woman's role in these negotiations. 'And that was all done by counsel of Branwen, and lest the land be laid waste she did that'³³.

All seems set fair. But everything is ruined, according to the author, by treachery. Ireland and Britain are both laid waste by war. In Bendigeidfran's absence, Caswallon son of Beli conquers the Island of the Mighty and is crowned king in London. Conscious of the loss of Britain, the author of the *Four Branches* portrays Caswallon as a usurper, wresting authority from its rightful possessors, even if he is also an enemy with a dishonourable secret weapon (a mantle of invisibility) against whom resistance is futile³⁴. In this Caswallon plays much the role of Henry I (1100-35), who exerted strict control over Wales, thanks to his military might. Had the *Four Branches* been written after 1135, in the time of the Anarchy (of which the Welsh took full advantage), they would hardly have represented the political authority of London as so remorseless³⁵. Even after 1154, when Henry II made vigorous efforts to undo what the Welsh had regained, he eventually came to terms with them. In their pessimistic attitude to Wales's relationship with government in

³³ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

³⁴ G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39; D. S. THOMSON, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

³⁵ D. WALKER, *Medieval Wales*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 45-47.



London, then, the *Four Branches* reflect the political climate of between 1116, when Gruffydd ap Rhys's insurrection ended in failure, and 1136, when the Welsh again rose against Norman power.

Even more than the first, therefore, the second of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* reveals an author possessed of much political information and experience. There is no reason to doubt that the work was written by anyone other than a member at the highest level of the Welsh ruling class.

3. *The Third Branch: The Tale of Manawydan*

The third of the *Four Branches* provides far less political material than the others. Even so, it reminds us that life goes on, even after catastrophe. Pryderi gives good advice to Manawydan, grieving for the death of his brother Bendigeidfran and the usurpation of the crown of London by Caswallon. Pryderi proposes the partition of his territories, with the seven cantrefws of Dyfed to be allotted to Manawydan and the seven of Seisyllwg to remain in Pryderi's hands. Pryderi goes to Oxford to render homage to Caswallon, who thereby parallels Henry I in his last years. A royal charter of 1133, when Henry I visited his new Oxford house (Beaumont Palace, on a site opposite the present Worcester College), has been described by Sir Richard Southern as 'the first evidence of a royal presence in the town for nearly seventy years'. Yet this need not be taken as providing evidence to date the *Four Branches* to after 1133, since Henry I visited Oxford long before that on his way to Woodstock, six miles north-west. Henry was at Woodstock in January 1123, with 'his bishops and all his court in attendance' as described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*³⁶. (Henry was back at this favourite hunting-lodge the following March, transacting important business.) The fact that Henry's court was in the Oxford area from the early 1120s and that he carried out royal business there is consistent with a dating of the *Four Branches* to the late 1120s.

³⁶ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-51; G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, pp.41-2; R. W. SOUTHERN, 'From Schools to University', in J. I. CATTO (ed.), *A History of the University of Oxford: The Early Oxford Schools*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, pp. 1-36, at p. 5.



We return to full political activity in the fourth branch. This provides detailed information on both the workings of government within Gwynedd, and on its relationships with Dyfed. It begins with a constitutional statement. Math was lord (*arglwydd*) over Gwynedd, and Pryderi lord over twenty-one cantrefs in the South. These were the seven of Dyfed, the seven of Seisyllwg, and the seven of Morgannwg³⁷. The vision of a greater Dyfed develops the theme of Dyfed expansionism that appears at the end of the first branch. We may also note that *arglwydd* is accurately used for Math's status. After Bendeigeidfran's death and Caswallon's usurpation of the crown of London, the ruler of Gwynedd is no longer a king (*brenin*). But *arglwydd* is known to alternate with *brenin* in the law books, and so also here³⁸. The author of the *Four Branches* may be vague on many matters, but not on royal rank.

4. The Fourth Branch: The Tale of Math Son of Mathonwy

The third branch had been one with scenes of pastoral tranquillity, celebrating the beauty of Dyfed and its abundance in game, honey, and fish. But the fourth branch deals with war. In order that Gilfaethwy may gain Goewin, his lord's handmaid, Gwydion starts a war between Gwynedd and Dyfed. He goes to seek magic swine from Pryderi in Ceredigion, which Pryderi says he cannot give, because there is a covenant (*amrot*) between him and his country³⁹. The text again shows familiarity with Welsh law, where *amod* is the ordinary word for 'contract'⁴⁰.

Gwydion devises a way to release Pryderi from his bond. Pryderi takes counsel and accepts Gwydion's offer, but soon finds he has been deceived. War follows. The hosts of Gwynedd and of Dyfed clash in the middle of the districts of Maenawr Bennardd and Maenawr Coed Alun. ('Pennarth' is still the name of a farm between Clynnog and Llanllyfni, some seven miles south of Caernarfon; 'Coed Alun' is the name of a mansion on the other side of the river

³⁷ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p. 67; G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

³⁸ Dafydd JENKINS - Morfudd OWEN (eds.), *The Welsh Law of Women*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1980, p. 191.

³⁹ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p. 69; G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p.57.

⁴⁰ D. JENKINS - M. OWEN, *op. cit.*, p.190.



Saint, directly opposite Caernarfon Castle.) The men of Dyfed retreat south to Nant Call, near the modern hamlet of Pant Glas, on the main road eleven miles south of Caernarfon. Slaughter continues. Then they retreat to Dolbenmaen, four miles south-east, still on the main road from Caernarfon to Portmadoc. There they make a truce, giving 24 hostages of noble rank (*gwyrda*)⁴¹.

The unusually detailed account of fighting on the strategic route south of Caernarfon still followed by A487 (and formerly by a standard-gauge railway), through the pass between the mountains of Snowdonia and those of Lleyn, is worth emphasis. Although fighting occurs often in the *Four Branches*, the writer shows no interest in describing it in detail, except here. The reason for this is surely a family one. In the rising of 1075, Gwenllïan's father had lost a battle against insurgents from Gwynedd backed by troops from Powys. Gruffudd was defeated at Bron yr Erw, somewhere in the upland gap two miles wide by Nant Call, perhaps near Brysgyni, a mile east of Clynnog Fawr on the coast⁴². Nothing would be easier for Gwenllïan than to set the campaign of the *Four Branches* in the region her own father had fought in.

The war ends when Gwydion kills Pryderi in single combat. The delicacy with which the writer comments on the defeat of Dyfed is worth stressing. 'The men of the South set forth with better lamentation towards their own land. Nor was it strange. They had lost their lord, and many of their noblemen, and their horses, and their arms for the most part'. Similarly, the writer is careful to mention how, at Gwydion's request, Math in his triumph agrees to free the hostages from Dyfed⁴³. As a Gwynedd princess married to a prince of Dyfed, Gwenllïan would have to treat with tact the feelings of her husband's kinsfolk.

Some unexpected points emerge in the account of Gwynedd in the aftermath of war. Math marries Goewin, declaring that he will give

⁴¹ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p.72; G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁴² J. E. LLOYD, *History of Wales*, p. 383; D. Simon EVANS, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

⁴³ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p.73; G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 60.



the authority (*medyant*) over his realm into her hands⁴⁴. Now, it is usually considered on the basis of the laws that Welsh queens had no political power, despite servants, privileges, and a third of the king's income from his personal land⁴⁵. Math's statement is therefore a striking one, though Ifor Williams notes that Middle Welsh *medyant* means 'authority', not 'possession' (unlike modern *meddiant*)⁴⁶. Another political feature comes out in Math's treatment of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy. They are making a circuit of the land, but return to Math's control when 'a ban (*guahard*) on their meat and drink went out against them'. Evidently a lord had the right to withdraw the render of a circuit from kinsfolk enjoying it⁴⁷.

The remaining political aspects of the last branch may be dealt with briefly. When Lleu enters the narrative and marries Blodeuedd, he is given the cantref of Dinoding as his domain, since (as Gwydion remarks), 'It is not easy for a man without territory (*heb gyuoeth*) to maintain himself (*gossymdeithaw*)'. Dinoding, as the writer tells us, is the region now represented by the Gwynedd commotes of Eifionydd (around Cricieth) and Ardudwy (from the Vale of Ffestiniog to Barmouth). Lleu sets up his court at Mur Castell, the old Roman fort of Tomen y Mur, on an exposed hilltop 1000 feet high near Trawsfynydd. All are content with his rule⁴⁸.

The episode once again reveals the point of view of the ruling class, for whom the provision of a domain for a young lord is a matter of importance. But Lleu's happiness ends tragically when his wife has an affair with Gronw, lord of the commote of Penllyn immediately east of Ardudwy, around Bala. Gronw stabs Lleu (who, transformed into an eagle, flies away) and seizes Ardudwy. Yet Lleu is eventually discovered, given his normal form, and restored to health at Caer Dathyl (perhaps the 'Toot Hill' at Caernarfon) with the aid of the best doctors of Gwynedd. From his stronghold of Penllyn, Gronw sends envoys to ask if Lleu will accept land or territory (*tir ae dayar* - yet another use of this legal expression) or gold or silver for his injury

⁴⁴ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p.74; G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁴⁵ A. H. WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p.144.

⁴⁶ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

⁴⁷ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p.74; G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*,p. 61.

⁴⁸ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p. 84; G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 68.



(*sarhaet* ‘insult, act of injury or wrong’, another legal word)⁴⁹. He will not. Lleu eventually slays Gronw, regains his lands, and rules them prosperously, eventually becoming lord of Gwynedd. Here the tale ends.

5. Aspects for Future Research

The above analysis of the politics of the *Four Branches* is far from exhaustive. It has hardly touched upon such issues (important to the medieval Welsh governing class) as fosterage, the concepts of honour and shame, or the etiquettes of hunting or feasting. There is also room for a monograph on the legal vocabulary and thinking of the *Four Branches* in the light of recent work on Welsh law, particularly as regards differences in legal practice between the various parts of Wales.

However, the five aspects outlined at the beginning of this paper come out clearly enough. The writer had a intimate knowledge of Welsh government; an easy familiarity with Welsh law; a lyrical love of Dyfed, and pride in its expansion (which went with a respect for Gwynedd and its military power); a belief in the older British constitution, according to which the island of Britain is a political unity under a Celtic king exalted with the crown of London (a constitutional theory leaving no room for invaders); and an awareness of that sovereignty at London as having been usurped by force, which must be acknowledged, resistance to it being pointless.

These attitudes accord perfectly with what we should expect of a Gwynedd princess of unusual intelligence, who was married to a Dyfed prince, and who came to maturity during the reign of Henry I. In short, the more the *Four Branches* are examined in detail, the more such analysis confirms the contention of the present writer that these tales are the work of Gwenllïan (c. 1098-1136), daughter of king Gruffudd ap Cynan of Gwynedd.

6. Possible Objections to Gwenllïan's Authorship

⁴⁹ Ifor WILLIAMS, *op. cit.*, p. 91; G. JONES and T. JONES, *op. cit.*, p.74.



Nevertheless, it may be worth pointing out to sceptics that there are ways they could disprove this writer's belief that Gwenllian wrote the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*. These fall under two headings. First are symptoms in the text which one could not attribute to a Welsh princess. If, for example, it could be proved that the writer of the *Four Branches* had had a professional training in Welsh bardic poetry, the attribution to Gwenllian would have to be rejected, since training as a Welsh bard was restricted to men in the early middle ages. If those who assert that the *Four Branches* are the work of a court poet can produce such evidence, then Gwenllian's authorship will, of course, have to be rejected. Alternatively, if it could be shown that the author of the *Four Branches* had a knowledge of Biblical or patristic learning or of canon law, then we would know that Gwenllian could not have written these tales, since such ecclesiastical learning would hardly be that of a medieval princess. Again, if it could be shown that the author had a familiarity with Irish tradition and culture explicable only by long residence in Ireland, they could not be the work of Gwenllian, who may have visited Ireland in 1127, but who is not known to have lived there for an extended period.

Secondly, Gwenllian's authorship could be disproved on the grounds of date. If any reference could be found to show that the *Four Branches* must have been written before about 1120, when Gwenllian attained her majority, or after 1136, when she was executed, then her authorship would be out of the question. If, for example, it could be shown that the *Four Branches* showed the influence of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, then they could not be the work of Gwenllian, since Geoffrey published his history shortly after Gwenllian's death in January 1136 and not before it.

If, however, the attribution of the *Four Branches* to Gwenllian is correct (as the present writer has not the slightest doubt that it is), research on them must inevitably confirm this fact in the years to come, whether they deal with the tales as regards their vocabulary, narrative techniques, learning, textual transmission, representation of material culture, or social and political outlook. As such, then, the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* offer a wealth of material to historians and others. Providing a unique window on twelfth-century



Wales and Ireland, they are amongst the glories of Wales, all the more so as the work of Princess Gwennlian, a woman writer who was a member of the royal houses of Gwynedd and Dyfed.