

Constructions of Gender in Medieval Welsh Literature

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Summary

The portrayal of men and women in medieval Welsh literature serves as a social tool by which to illustrate or instruct in ideal behaviour, and to demonstrate the consequences of refusing to fulfil one's obligations in society. From the earliest 'heroic' poetry, where male and female are shown as distinctly opposite poles in the domestic and martial spheres, to the complex relationships of the Four Branches, literary characterisation is employed to address both the ideal and the failures of the social system. This literature is not strictly about the triumph of man, but of the balance of male and female power, the ties of family and obligation, and the importance of adherence to a social code in order to remain accepted by society. Through examining the historic poems of Taliesin, the *Gododdin* and the *englynion* cycles, the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi* and the tale of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, we can form a picture of the evolution of gender roles in early Wales, in which ways they remain constant and in which they shift over the course of the early middle ages.

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Introduction

Men, Women, and History

‘The battle between the sexes is the only one in which both sides regularly sleep with the enemy.’

Quentin Crisp

The discussion of gender in medieval literary criticism is generally considered to be a relatively new field, having achieved real momentum only in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, since it was the early fifteenth century when Christine de Pisan wrote a response to Jean de Meun’s *Romance of the Rose*, it cannot really be imagined that the medieval audience was too primitive to be fully aware of the subtext inside their stories. Although Tim Connell argues that the modern constructions of gender emerged in the fifteenth century, brought on by the Reformation and European colonial expansion, Ruth Mazo Karras points out that ‘not one of these causes, however, erupted full blown in the early modern period; the Middle Ages form part of their history.’¹

If humanity yet contains some universal connection to the past, then by investigating it, we might learn something about ourselves. If nothing else, exploring the threads that make up the fabric of our history can shine a rather glaring light on the nature and real origin of some of our own traditions. E.J. Lloyd said in 1911 that:

The literature of a nation reflects its life and customs, embodies its main characteristics, and acts as a mirror to its history, social conditions, and religious conceptions. Here we find reflected the national character and highest aspirations of a people.²

Therefore the purpose of this project is to begin to explore the nature of gender in literature, both as representative of differing societal values and as characters fulfilling a role within a story.

¹ R Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia 2003) 18.

²E.J. Lloyd, ‘The Mabinogion as Literature,’ *The Celtic Review*: 7 (May 1911), 165.

If the study of the feminine is relatively new, then the study of the masculine, or at least of what makes it so, rather than the baseline for all of human history, is equally so. As medieval woman was considered a defective man, not quite fully formed into the ultimate male potential, so have women in literature either been studied and measured against the baseline of the genderless masculine, or removed to a separate fishbowl to be dissected without reference to the male at all. Meanwhile men have been considered within the field of gender history not merely for themselves, but as the dominant segment of society, despite the disparities of time, class, and vocation. As men and women have lived beside each other for the entire span of human existence, notions of masculine and feminine really must be considered together in order to be fully understood. In literature as in life, so much of both are built on reactions to the threats and promises, whether real or perceived, from the other. As Karras observes, ‘we cannot understand women’s lives without understanding men as men (as opposed to men as the normative humans, the traditional focus of historical study).’³ Thelma Fenster, in her introduction to *Medieval Masculinities*, adds to that:

As that reductive narrative obscured the many, flattening diversity and failing to record difference, obliterating *men as men*, it projected the local, the gendered, and the temporally bounded onto a universal, genderless, and atemporal screen, willingly ignoring the power imbalances thus served. In that way women were rendered invisible, but, ironically enough, so were gendered men⁴.

The problem presented here is not a simple turn of focus from the masculine to the feminine; it is not that men are not being paid enough attention. Rather, by accepting the male as a historical or literary standard of measurement, the female is implicitly relegated to othered status, and all focus done on her will be *as a female*, rather than as a character, a sister, a warrior, a queen.

³ Karras 19.

⁴ T Fenster, ‘Preface — Why Men?’ *Medieval Masculinities — Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (ed.) Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis & London 1994) x.

Medieval Welsh literature, when taken as a whole corpus, suffers from somewhat less than others of the early middle ages with regard to disparity of gender. *Culhwch ac Olwen*, a very masculine wonder tale, is balanced by the remarkable characterisation of both men and women in the Four Branches, and even the so-called ‘romances’ seem rather confused when forced to shift focus from brotherly companionship and deal with the same male-female relationships as their French counterparts. The clearest demarcations between men and women are found in the so-called ‘heroic’ poetry of Taliesin and Aneirin, by its almost complete exclusion of women, and even that is muted by the similarities between the protagonists of the ninth-century englynion cycles concerning Llywarch Hen and Heledd, whose stories so parallel each other that for some time they were conflated. Throughout, a pattern can be seen to emerge. The province of men is the battlefield, while women are both confined to and symbolic of the domestic hearth. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowalski, regarding the public/private dichotomy of individual power, observe that ‘medieval society, with its wars, territorial struggles, and violence seems particularly hostile to the exercise of female initiative and power’.⁵ Men’s power lies in swords, in hands, in physical action; women’s power lies in the influence of their words. Whether that influence is enough to successfully manipulate the world around them is dependent on both the willingness and the ability of the men around them to overcome it; sometimes the men prevail, sometimes the woman is the victor, while at other times, chaos descends and no one can be seen to have gained anything at all. And of course biological sex alone does not determine a person’s place in society. In a corpus of literature where magic can change a person’s sex, species, or fate, roles

⁵Erler, Mary and Maryanne Kowalski, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens GA & London, 1988). i.

are formed on a trapeze net of familial, social, and class obligations that dictate proper action.

With regard to the societal structuring of gender, Jo Ann McNamara suggests a ‘masculinity crisis’ that prompts, at various historical intervals, changes in the way men relate to women:

Experience indicates that the masculine gender is fragile and tentative, with weaker biological underpinnings than the feminine. It requires strong social support to maintain fictions of superiority based solely on a measure of physical strength. The assignment of social roles and status on the basis of biological sex has customarily been justified as resting on the bedrock of natural law, decreed by God and nature and therefore beyond the reach of historical change. This has hitherto made the gender system almost impervious to challenge. In recent scholarship, however, the immutable laws of nature have been exposed as mere creatures of time and cultural change.⁶

Throughout history, therefore, literature had its part in constructing, subverting, and questioning the dominant gender paradigm, and as secular and ostensibly non-historical material, it had more freedom to do so than other forms of expression. It is important to note, as Karras does, that the vast majority of medieval writing that has passed down to us was copied by men who had rejected sexuality and so claimed a different type of masculinity, and it is their lens which cannot help but filter our reading⁷. If they take for granted the relative positions of men and women in society, they do, at times, focus heavily on other methods of expressing masculine and feminine, but also homosocial, behaviour.

And yet, love is not always a battlefield. While there is much to be discussed in the differences in the relative positions of the sexes, there is ample room for collaboration. Men and women are not locked in endless, incessant combat for superiority. The Four Branches in particular illustrate the need for cooperation in order to achieve real harmony, and emphasise a partnership not only of labour, but of

⁶ J. McNamara, ‘The Herrenfrage: The Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150.’ *Medieval Masculinities — Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (ed.) Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis & London 1994) 3-29, p. 3.

⁷ Karras 10.

intellect. Pwyll is not threatened by Rhiannon's rather obvious mental superiority, and at no point in the narrative does he feel the need to exercise any kind of domination over her in order to prove himself. Manawydan, more her intellectual equal, displays very few signs of traditional masculinity at all. And Gwydion of the Fourth Branch shifts between genders both figuratively and literally at several points. The roles of the characters are not immutable any more than is their status within the society they inhabit.

Even with that acknowledged, discussion of the 'bare bones' of masculinity, femininity, and social position barely brushes the outermost edge of gender studies. It can at most lay a foundation by which to explore more deeply the pluralism of sexual and interpersonal relationships and the basis of medieval identity.

Chapter 1

Heroic Poetry and the Englyn Cycles

The poetry attributed to the earliest Welsh poets is an excessively masculine affair, in which brave heroes ride forth to wreak havoc and slaughter on their enemies. Gillian Overing said of *Beowulf* that ‘we certainly do not need feminist theory to tell us that [it] is a profoundly masculine poem’’, and for the most part the same can be said of the Anglo-Saxons’ Old British brethren. The heroic poetry paints a clear picture of ideal male behaviour, at least in the view of the poet and his audience. The presence of women in the heroic sagas—— — that poetry long considered to have begun in oral tradition and dealing primarily with battles, conquerors and feats of strength — is rare, and used almost exclusively to provide a contrast between the male domain of the battlefield and the domestic sphere. In one instance, the poem called ‘Pais Dinogad’, there is a definite feminine presence, however, and she is not in opposition to the male ideal but the vehicle by which it is passed down. In the later poetic cycles, this ‘heroic ideal’ is under some scrutiny, questioned and dissected in *Canu Llywarch Hen* while the feminine influence and consequence is dealt with in *Canu Heledd*. It seems clear that at least by the *Llywarch Hen* poems that the concept of what it means to be a man is an issue presented not by accident, that the poet has a clear understanding of the function of his work in representing or rejecting an ideal. Jenny Rowland states in *Early Welsh Saga Poetry* that dialogues and soliloquies in the persona of a narrator allow for deeper discussions than that addressed in traditional praise poetry, that ‘the narrative character of the poetry allows the poets to explore themes closed to them in panegyric, such as the limits of the heroic code, the conflict of family and political ties, and the opposing pulls of the religions life v. the

secular.’⁸ Therefore the narrative cycles of Llywarch Hen and Heledd are able to explore the consequences of the cultural glorification of self-sacrifice in a way that the *Gododdin* or the praises of Urien are not. This small variety of poems — praises and elegies, for the glorious victors or the noble fallen, from bards and friends and loved ones left behind, may share a similar purpose, but from differing perspectives and with differing objectives. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the portrayal of ideal masculine behaviour and the relative position of women through the poems of Taliesin and Aneirin, and the ninth- and tenth-century sagas associated with the figures of Llywarch and Heledd.

The heroic culture of ancient Britain was a complex process of compromise and balance. A powerful king was powerful because of the war-band that fought for him, and he bought their loyalty with treasures. Glory and fame, Aneirin tells us many times in the *Gododdin*, is the highest goal, greater than gold, or loyalty, or (by omission) perhaps even the rewards of Heaven. Errant warriors of an age for military service would seek out a lord who could promise them fame and riches, and in this the poets, those spin doctors of the heroic age, were instrumental. When Taliesin calls Urien, *haelaf dyn bedyd* (‘most generous man in Christendom’) before listing the gifts the king has bestowed on him and the many battles he has won, it is not only gratitude but advertising. Like an ancient advertisement for military recruitment, he is declaring that here is a man who rewards his followers, and because he is so often victorious he has plenty of treasure to give.

The tenets of this culture and its approved behaviour remains dependent on the definition put forth by the Chadwicks in *The Heroic Age* and *The Growth of Literature*, with its emphasis on a tradition of oral epic poetry. That there was some tradition of panegyric and elegiac poetry by the sixth century seems clear despite an

⁸ Rowland J. *Early Welsh Saga Poetry* (Cambridge, 1990) 2.

unfortunate lack of surviving written evidence; in ‘Gildas and Vernacular Poetry’ Patrick Sims-Williams calls the medieval *beirdd* ‘the true heirs of their British counterparts’⁹ and quotes — although without completely subscribing to — an assertion by Jackson that the poems in the earliest surviving manuscripts were ‘a direct continuation of the bardic panegyric in praise of the nobility which was the classic concept of poetry among the Celts from the beginning.’¹⁰ Certainly this was an idea popular with and propagated by the later medieval poets in Wales, and forms a large part of the difficulty with linguistic and stylistic methods of determining a date for much of the surviving poetry. The Welsh language, unlike English, remained stable for several centuries; the *gogynfeirdd* were prone to using archaic turns of phrase, and untroubled by modern concepts of intellectual property ownership. For this reason, portrayal of a heroic ethos lasted considerably longer in Wales than in England, where the Norman influence of post-conquest France had shifted much of the popular literature toward romance and the troubadour lyric by the middle of the twelfth century, the same time that Owain Cyfeiliog, perhaps with the help of the professional poet, Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr, was composing the *Gododdin*-inspired ‘Hirlas Owain.’

The ideal of heroic male behaviour in the *Gododdin* is summed up by Jackson, who explains that ‘the accepted morality is courage and fierceness in war, generosity and liberality in peace, a longing for fame, a horror of disgrace, and a welcome for death provided it leads to immortal glory.’¹¹ The poet mentions from the very first lines how the last has been achieved and in this much he can be said to have achieved his aims, for the names of the warriors live on despite lack of evidence surrounding

⁹ Sims-Williams, P. ‘Gildas and Vernacular Poetry,’ *Gildas: New Approaches*, eds. D.M. Dumville and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge 1984) 169-92, p. 174.

¹⁰ Sims-Williams, ‘Gildas’ 182.

¹¹ Jackson, K Y *Gododdin: The Earliest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh 1969) 38.

their actual battle, defeat, or even existence. The desire for immortality through fame, rather than loyalty to lord or cause is continually put forward as the chief reason for the party's having engaged in the battle in the first place, although the bonds of obligation to the lord is never very far in the background. Aneirin says that they 'paid for their mead-feast with their lives' and rather than being a tragic loss of a few hundred good warriors, their determination and refusal to surrender make their deaths palatable, a cause for celebration rather than lament. Brechiawl, though he died, 'was the talk of the world', while the son of Swyno 'sold his life for the mention of honour' and the son of Nwython slew 'a hundred princes so that he might be praised'. Each warrior is often assigned an elegy of his own, so that his name might be one that is remembered, not only as one of a group, but as an individual hero; this means the virtues, being of a kind, become repetitive. But the identity of the *gosgordd* as a unit is important as well. Late in the poem, one stanza reads

Trychant eurdorchog a grysiasant
yn am wyn breithell, bu edrywant
Cyd ryladded wy, wy lladasant,
a hyd orffen byd edmyg fyddant.¹²

Although many of the warriors are described as princes and leaders in at home, there is a certain egalitarian aesthetic used as well. Line 72,

a hen a ieuainc a hydr a llaw
dadl ddiau angau i eu treiddaw¹³

reminds the reader that death is a surety for everyone, and that an honourable one can be claimed by those who are brave enough to seek it. The subject of the line is not entirely clear; the 'old and young, powerful and lowly' could also refer to the victims of the deeds of the son of Bodgad's hand. However the same lines are echoed two stanzas later in a set of lines focused seemingly entirely on the host of the Gododdin

¹² Jarman, A.O.H. *Aneirin: Y Gododdin — Britain's Oldest Heroic Poem* (Llandysul 1988) 69.

¹³ Jarman 7.

itself. Even if the earlier two lines were meant to refer to the slain enemies, the latter appear seem, while not explicit, as clear as anything in this poem can be said to be:

glasfedd eu hancwyn a gwenwyn fu
trychant trwy beiriant yn catau
a gwedi elwch tawelwch fu
cyd elwynt lannau i benydu
dadl ddiau angau i eu treiddu¹⁴.

The feast of fresh mead became bitter, there was a cry of jubilation followed by silence, and death came to the warriors. Young and old, powerful and lowly, whether breathless before a maiden or fighting for her favour — the one certainty was death, and that was a ‘tru o dynghedfen, angen gywir,’ there was no escaping it. Those same words are repeated later as well, in reference to Tudfwlch and Cyfwlch Hir, a stanza composed almost entirely of recycled images: the wretched fate, the inexorable destiny, the bitterness of formerly sweet mead. That the warriors were ready to charge into combat without care for their own lives makes them worthy of praise:

wy ceryn gon gwylaes ddisgyn,
ni phorthasan warth wŷr ni thechyn.¹⁵

They chose death over life, battle over a comfortable home, longevity in name over longevity in life. They gave, if not as good as they got, then at least all they had.

As a poem about men doing martial, masculine things, women are almost entirely absent. The place of women in heroic poetry and the *Gododdin* in particular, and the warriors’ relationship with them, consists primarily of contrast. As Chandler says, ‘the society [the warriors] form does not include women other than to establish a distant ‘other’ with which to define the terms of their macho society’¹⁶. Men are what women are not. In the medieval medical concept of the humours, women were thought to be cold and wet, while men were warm and dry — polar opposites in all

¹⁴ Jarman 7.

¹⁵ Jarman 61.

¹⁶ Chandler, K. *Masculinity in Medieval Welsh Literature*. PhD Thesis (University of Wales Aberystwyth 2004) 35.

ways, with the women being considered, in Milton's words, a 'fair defect of nature',¹⁷ a human not quite formed to the full potential of the male. There is some evidence of a Celtic prehistory in which women could and did both rule tribes and lead them into battle, though perhaps not regularly. Peter Berresford Ellis describes the archaeological finds of prehistoric burial sites for warrior-queens, in which the interred were buried with chariots, heroes' torques, and other symbols of battle prowess;¹⁸ unfortunately material artefacts are every bit as subject to interpretation as obscure lines of poetry. The ambiguous identity of the most familiar of these, the Vix 'princess', illustrates some of the difficulties inherent in this monumental task. Impressive jewellery and imported objects indicate a high status and associations with the wider world, but assertions of her actual identity, whether princess, priestess, or simply a wealthy lady with the means to purchase a well-appointed grave, remain educated conjecture.

Later history fares marginally better, as the Roman chroniclers recorded the names of Boudica, Teuta, Onamaris and Cartimandua. The focus of these historians was exclusively martial, and once a warleader is no longer winning battles, his or her name disappears from surviving mentions. Boudica and Cartimandua, well-documented regents, are dealt with on an individual basis rather than as representative of Celtic women in general, although Ellis quotes Ammianus Marcellinus as writing that 'a whole troop of foreigners would not be able to withstand a single Celt if he called his wife to his assistance'¹⁹ and Boudica herself is reported by Tacitus as saying 'this is not the first time that Britons have been led into battle by a woman.'²⁰

Both Roman and history have imparted their own judgements on the ancient queens.

¹⁷ Milton, 'Paradise Lost' ln. 892

¹⁸ For more detail of the evidence, such as it is, of prehistoric and Roman-era Celtic warrior queens, see Ellis' chapter 'Women in Early History' in *Celtic Women* (London 1995). Since much of the analysis amounts to eager conjecture I have not dealt too much with it here, but it is interesting all the same.

¹⁹ Ellis, P.B.. *Celtic Women* (London 1995) 82.

²⁰ Ellis 87.

Tacitus calls Cartimandua ‘treacherous’ for her actions in turning over Caratacus to the Romans even as he praises her loyalty²¹, and even into this century a reporter expressed dismay at evidence of Boudica’s brutal methods²².

The Irish tradition is notable for possessing a number of formidable literary queens, who may have begun as goddesses or real women but are now so conflated that it is impossible to distinguish, or determine whether they might have been based on an actual person. The mythology of the British Isles is so tied up with its history that there is a point where they blend together, as even those who wrote them down may not have been sure of their origin. Ellis observes:

...in 377BC Macha Mong Ruadh became queen of all Ireland....Granted that many historians do not like to put their trust in the early chronicles relating to Irish prehistory, regarding such people as purely mythical, the fact remains that there are strong traditions of Macha that are, unfortunately, often mixed with the goddess Macha. Nevertheless, the historical figure, once disentangled from these traditions, seems a fairly tangible one²³.

From the point of view of cultural, rather than tangible, history, whether Macha or women like her existed is less important than the idea that people wrote about them. Welsh and Irish heroines are most often described as euhemerised goddess figures — Maedb of Connacht, Rhiannon and Aranrhod of the Four Branches, even Queen Guinevere. It is a delicate task to balance these aspects, especially as the functions of goddesses is subject to reinterpretation over the centuries as their stories are revisited by writers or cultures with disparate agendas. Guinevere may have once been the shadow of a sovereignty goddess, and certainly there are places where she fulfils that role, but later she becomes the fallen Eve, the pivot of female folly on which an empire crumbles, and by the twenty-first century she becomes a blue-painted Amazon for a post-feminist age. P. K. Ford describes the

²¹ Tacitus, *Annals* 12.32.

²² Burke, J. ‘Dig uncovers Boudicca’s brutal streak’ *The Observer*, 3 December 2000.

²³ Ellis 81.

clear discomfort of early writers when faced with women, by observing that ‘ultimately, at the mythological level (and in a sense this is the *real* cultural matrix), the Celtic woman was ravishingly beautiful, horrifyingly ugly, a symbol of well-being and irrevocable doom, and aggressively sexual’²⁴. The fact that early mentions by the Roman chroniclers of female battle leaders such as Boudica and Cartimandua exist suggests that while they were unlikely to have been the norm, they were also not completely out of the realm of possibility. However, JoAnn McNamara explains that while even by the tenth century such women existed (she cites Mathilda of Tuscany and Gaeta, wife of Richard Guiscard, as examples) they were considered exceptional for reasons of blood or spirituality, rather than representative of their sex:

...where dynastic needs occasionally decreed that princes should be women, family and class interests could supersede gender without threatening the right order of things. The noble blood of ladies triumphed over their female weaknesses in competition with men of inferior status.²⁵

By the time the *Gododdin* is said to take place (regardless of when it was actually composed), Brittonic tribes had been converted to Christianity and accepted much of its doctrine. The early church owed much of its gender philosophy to Aristotle, who supposed that since in most animal species the male is the larger and more agile, that masculine superiority was the natural order of the universe, and to question it would be detrimental to the entire community. The place of women was, then, firmly entrenched in the domestic sphere or in certain ritual positions, and in heroic poetry it was to provide a contrast and context, however brief, for the praise of men. They are the remaining, the mourners and weepers, those too weak to go into battle and earn glory for themselves; whereas the later chivalric romances will make them a prize, for now they are only the ones left behind.

²⁴ Ford, P.K. ‘Celtic Women: The Opposing Sex’ *Viator*: 19 (1988) 417-438, p 418.

²⁵ McNamara 4.

Medieval Christian attitudes toward sex were conflicted, and remained in flux for centuries. While celibacy and chastity were seen as the more spiritual, and therefore admirable, path, the idealism collided with culture which put great stock in martial victory, as well as the dynastic necessity of procreation. While it is all well and good to say that real men abstain from sex and ignore women, in reality this would end with a large number of unaccounted-for single women and no heirs to carry on the fathers' dynastic lines. This is hardly a problem exclusive purely to British poetry, for the Geats and the Danes of *Beowulf* face similar difficulties. Overing calls the tribes 'motherless families'²⁶ and Clare Lees observes that 'while praising these dynasties, the poem leaves us in no doubt of their tenuous hold on life in the hall'.²⁷

While *Beowulf* ends on a problematic note with regard to succession, the *Gododdin*, celebratory elegy of the heroic ethos that it is, blithely ignores it. While some of the warriors are princes, that identity is subsumed within their warrior nature, and the *gosgordd* itself takes on the role of family for the group. There are the leaders, the father-figures, the younger brothers. While there are references to other parts of their lives, all those glimpses of who they might have been as *people* are lost in the point of the poem, that is, who they were as heroes, as warriors, as men.

Even so, some leaps can be made from what few references to women there are. For the most part, women are referred to as a thing which real heroic men avoid, as in the first two elegies in the poem. The young Owain, who is 'in might a man, a youth in years' and who has chosen battle over marriage, and the second youth, described as 'breathless before a maiden' both exemplify the path of martial valour over surrender to feminine charms. Chandler points out that 'while this may be a

²⁶ qtd. in Lees, C. 'Men and Beowulf.' *Medieval Masculinities — Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis & London 1994) 129-148, p. 141.

²⁷ Lees, 'Men and Beowulf' 141.

source for a little gentle humour, the statement also hints at a female power that even brave young men are unable to withstand, a power which is seen elsewhere in medieval literature as destructive²⁸ and that ‘the references to breathlessness reflect an anxiety about the power of female sexuality that is always countered by references to martial prowess’²⁹. Certainly the theme of women as monsters, or a dark power that men must overcome, is a common one that can be seen from early incarnations of Grendel’s mother of *Beowulf* and the Black Witch of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, all the way up through John Knox’ misogynistic sixteenth-century treatise against the ‘monstrous regiment of women’.

There are only a few other instances in the *Gododdin* where women are mentioned at all. The ‘son of Urfai’ is described as being approachable by a ‘lady and a maiden and a lord’ at a New Year’s feast in his home province, to contrast his violent behaviour on the battlefield:

ef gwenit a dan vab ervei
 ef gwenit a dan dwrch trahawc
 vn riein a morwyn a mynawc.³⁰

Although the lady and the maiden are not important as individuals, or even necessarily as representatives of the female sex, their positioning here is still telling. On one hand, while the warrior might be an ‘arrogant boar’, he is generous still when dealing with those weaker, a quality to be admired in a hero’s domestic life. The women also act as indicators of the domesticity of the court, thereby adding another level of separation to the divide between it and the battlefield.

In line 647 is one enigmatic mention of a woman:

a merch Eudaf Hir, drais Gwanannon
 oedd borffor wisgiadur, dir amdrychion³¹.

²⁸ Chandler 18.

²⁹ Chandler 20.

³⁰ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, 57.

³¹ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, 45

The identity of this mysterious woman clothed in the imperial or regal purple is unclear, as is her purpose in the poem. The most simple conclusion, given the proximity of her name to his, is that she is the wife of Mynyddog and co-sponsor of the warband, as the subject of the lines is the expedition itself rather than its instigators. While it is likely Eudaf, and not his nameless daughter, who is the oppressor of Gwanannon, it is not entirely clear which of them is ‘clothed in purple,’ a descriptor which can have more than one meaning. The colour purple is commonly associated with royalty, and to describe Mynyddog or his wife this way seems perfectly reasonable. In *De Excidio Britanniae*, Gildas says that Ambrosius Aurelianus’ parents ‘had worn the purple, were slain in it,’ which Gidlow suggests refers not only to their status as Roman leaders but equates purple with being covered in blood³². There is ample evidence, of course, of the use of purple being exactly what it first looks like: a colour that signifies royalty or similarly high status. Bede, for instance, writes, ‘Theodosium Hispanum uirum restituendae reipublicae necessitate apud Syrmium purpura induit, Orientisque et Thraciae simul praefecit imperio’. In this case the wearing purple is a passive act, something that is done to the subject, rather than something he takes on himself. Gildas then could be ironically stating that the ‘greatest gift’ given to Ambrosius’ parents is similar to the ‘gift’ of the Saxons to the Britons just before — the honour of martyrdom. While it would be far-fetched to suggest that the death of the lady in question was the impetus for the Catraeth raid, still there is a literary purpose to the double entendre. If she is the lady of Din Eidyn, it becomes necessary then for the poet to associate her with the action and with masculine martial qualities by evoking her father. She is not herself, or even Mynyddog’s wife, which would tie him instead to the domestic sphere by her

³² Gidlow C. *The Reign of Arthur: From History to Legend* (Sutton 2004) 80.

presence there, but the daughter of a warrior who ‘oppressed a land of broken men’³³. In this way she is separated from the other women, the widows and mourning mothers, and placed instead at the side of a lord, clothed in a colour both imperially regal and violently bloody — but, like Heledd or Hildeburh, she is not associated with a battle that was actually successful. Women, it seems, doom heroes to fail.

This assertion is borne out by Jenny Rowland’s observation that ‘references to women in the early sagas appear because they play a role in the story, in some way influencing events whether passively or actively’³⁴, but that influence is seldom positive. For the most part the presence of women indicates loss for whichever side they belong to, the vulnerable remainder of a defeated people. In the *Gododdin* this is subverted somewhat, as the goal of the poet is to celebrate the slaughter wreaked by the warriors before their inevitable demise, and the mourning women all belong to the ultimately victorious enemy:

Saith gymeint o Loegrwys a laddasant
O gyfrysedd gwagedd gwyddw a wnaethant,
Llawer mam a’i deigr ar ei hamrant³⁵.

While it seems reasonable to accept that mothers, sisters, wives and lovers will be mourning the fallen *Gododdin* warriors as well, they are not mentioned — instead, these men will be remembered by the poet — also a man — who will celebrate their heroism in a way that befits them, rather than weeping over their absence. The poet does not deny feeling sadness, or that the loss of so many warriors constitutes a grievous loss to the court and to him personally. He says,

O winfaeth a meddfaeth ydd aethant i gennyn
Llurugogion, neus gwn llaith letgynt³⁶

as well as

³³ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, 44.

³⁴ Rowland, EWSP, 142.

³⁵ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, 37.

³⁶ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, 37.

O osgordd Fynyddog, fawr dru³⁷.

He is not the only one at the court to feel keenly the loss of these heroes, but he is doing his duty as chronicler of their deeds to ensure that their memories not only live on, but do so in a grand, clamouring fashion, with the emphasis on their greatness rather than their defeat. The next stanza is more personal, recalling the men enjoying 'wine and mead' around the table in the court, of time they had all spent together.

O osgordd Fynyddog handwyf adfeillio
a rhwy a gollais o'm gwir garant³⁸.

That 'real' elegy is a masculine domain is a point also mentioned by Rowland, who says that 'while there is some evidence of women lamenting the dead, as in the Irish *keen*, the formal mode in early Welsh literature, both bardic and saga, is...an exclusively male preserve'³⁹. There is a tradition in Irish bardic verse as well as the later Welsh poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym and Guto'r Glyn of the poet presenting himself as a spouse or lover of his patron, 'bound together in a marriage which...was indissoluble except for the intervention of the Son of God himself',⁴⁰ of the male poet embracing certain aspects of female emotion where a warrior would not. Even within this comparison, however, the contrast between the view of both genders is very clear: when women mourn, it is with raw emotion and wailing, when men do it, it has metrical form and a rhyme scheme. The exception to this is the *Canu Heledd*, in which the narrator, while fitting within the role of a mourning woman, also is credited with haunting poetry. Rowland says that 'Heledd is not a necessary choice for either the role of 'last survivor' or the lamenter of her family'⁴¹, and that because she is, rather than some other witness to the destruction or some other member of the court, an involvement in the background events of the disaster is implicit. She does claim

³⁷ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, 37.

³⁸ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, 39.

³⁹ Rowland, EWSP, 142.

⁴⁰ Mac Cana, P.. 'The Poet as Spouse of His Patron.' *Ériu*: 39 (1988) 79-85, p. 82

⁴¹ Rowland, EWSP, 142.

that ‘vyn tauawt ae gwnaeth’⁴², that her words were responsible for the destruction of Baschurch and the deaths of her sister Ffreuer and her brothers. The precise nature of her role is a matter on which we can only conjecture; it is the aftermath of her survival that is the focus of the poetry, and this is certainly a feature that distinguishes the englynion cycles from their strictly heroic cousins. Rowland suggests that ‘heroic literature and history indicates one sort of story which gives prominence and importance to women’⁴³, that being those that involve alliance marriages gone awry, then lists several examples that suggest this seems to have happened regularly enough to make the situation readily recognisable. The Finnsburh fragment of *Beowulf* shows a heartbroken Hildeburh presiding over the funeral of her brother and son after her people have been slaughtered by her husband’s:

Het ða Hildeburh æt Hnæfes ade
 e selfre sunu sweoloðe befæstan,
 banfatu bærnan ond on bæl don
 eame on eaxle⁴⁴.

The image is a haunting one, followed in the next stanza by her singing mourning songs as the smoke of the funeral pyre curls into the sky, a perfect illustration of the position of women in heroic society as mourners and the emotional victims of their own incapacity for heroic behaviour. Branwen of the Second Branch of the *Mabinogi* is another such story, and a demonstration of the possibility of a foreign bride’s presence as a reminder of insults not yet avenged. In Branwen’s case, she takes on a guilt that does not actually belong to her, accepting, apparently, that her position as catalyst of the action also makes her the instigator; the reader’s view of her, however, cannot help but be sympathetic. Marged Haycock observes that Ifor Williams never quite managed to ‘unravel the enigma of Heledd’s guilt, and the ‘misfortune’ wrought by her tongue, and to square that somehow with the cycle’s overall sympathetic

⁴² Rowland, EWSP, 435.

⁴³ Rowland, EWSP, 142.

⁴⁴ *Beowulf* lns 1117-20.

picture of her⁴⁵. It is quite possible that Heledd has done the same as Branwen, whether accepting a blame placed on her by someone else, or a simple case of survivor's guilt. There is too much of the story missing to be sure, and much of what can be put together is historically unlikely if not outright impossible, but it seems likely that there was some previous tradition or story involving Heledd that may have been more familiar to a medieval audience. For a time, however, her story was conflated with that of Llywarch Hen, who was considered to be a real historical person and the genuine author of his englynion and hers as well. Haycock points out that William Owen-Pughe, translating the works in the late eighteenth century, was not inclined to look for a female protagonist in the poetry and therefore did not find one.⁴⁶ Certainly she is an anomaly, both representative of and subverting the position of her gender.

There is another significant female presence in the heroic poetry, although she is not ever named, or precisely mentioned as such. One of the *gorchanau* appended to the end of the *Gododdin* text, known as 'Pais Dinogad', is a poem of only seventeen lines that Jackson called 'a delightful cradle song'⁴⁷. It is easy to see why he thought this, with the poem's informal and often onomatopaeic language, lines like the description of the absent father calling his dogs:

Giff! Gaff! Daly, daly! Dwg, dwg!⁴⁸

But while the format might be that of a nursery rhyme — and the poem is indeed addressed to a small child — it is an elegy as much as the stanzas of the *Gododdin*, and it was likely because of this element that it was included where it was. Jackson suggests the poem entered the corpus of the *Gododdin* in Strathclyde, which was the

⁴⁵ Haycock, M. 'The Rediscovery of Heledd.' CSANA Annual Meeting, Athens, GA 2005.

⁴⁶ Haycock, 'The Rediscovery of Heledd'.

⁴⁷ Jackson 46.

⁴⁸ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, 69.

last of the Brittonic kingdoms to be taken over by the Saxons and therefore took in a number of noble British refugees⁴⁹. Because of the reference to the falls of Derwennydd, the Derwent of Cumbria, the poem can likely be placed in what had been Rheged,⁵⁰ a scenario which really makes a good deal of sense. The displaced nobility of Rheged might possibly have fled to other nearby kingdoms, and by the mid-seventh century, Strathclyde was the only one that remained.

This is another example of a female mourner, but with a vastly different outlook from Heledd. Through a pattering song, a mother tells her son Dinogad about his father, all without mentioning his death. Haycock cites Thomson's observation of the telling use of the imperfect tense in these lines, and the way they indicate without explicitly stating that the subject of them will not be returning⁵¹. It is subtle, but all the achievements of this poem are subtle, cloaking mourning and teaching inside a gentle tone. While the actual poet might well have been male, the narrator is not; it is the mother, here, who bears the responsibility for the transmission of the heroic ethos: 'Prif fwriad y gerdd, mae'n sicr, oedd coffâu afaith ei gampau gwrywraidd wrth hela/rhyfela a'u cyflwyno felt patrwm i'r mab ei efelychu'⁵². By telling the boy about his father's virtues, his excellence at hunting and weaponry, to be sure, but also by her own quiet acceptance of the situation, she provides him with a lesson on what it is to be a man in the Old British North. She is not mourning, though surely she feels the loss. The mantle itself, is, as Haycock explains, 'yn emblem o'r clymau rhwng y llefarwraig a'r plentyn, rhyngddi hi a'r heliwr marw, a rhwng Dinogad a'i dad. Yn y fantell y mae'r cof'⁵³.

⁴⁹ Jackson 63-7.

⁵⁰ Gruffydd, R. G. 'Where was Rhaeadr Derwennydd?' *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture: A Festschrift for Eric P. Hamp*, ed. A. T. E. Matonis & Daniel F. Melia (Van Nuys, California 1990) 261-66.

⁵¹ Haycock, 'Mantell Dinogad' 2.

⁵² Haycock, 'Mantell Dinogad' 2.

⁵³ Haycock, 'Mantell Dinogad' 2.

The *Gododdin* and its *gorchanau* are not alone, of course, in the portrayal of the heroic past of the old British north. This chapter would be far from complete without reference to Taliesin's poems to Urien Rheged, those of the Llyfr Taliesin that Ifor Williams first claimed had a historical basis. Saunders Lewis said of Urien that he 'became, through Taliesin's portrayal, the accepted model of the Welsh Christian king, of the Welsh leader of his people. He is no adventurer. He does not win a kingdom. He is the acknowledged heir, the inevitable defender of his inheritance, his country's anchor, its shelter'⁵⁴. The bond between poet and king in early Britain was a symbiotic one, with a distinct set of expectations upon each. The bard was an officer of the court, as the Anglo-Saxon *scop*, bound to perform a specific function. *The Law of Hywel Dda* enumerates the titles, responsibilities and compensation of the tenth-century *pencerdd* and *bard teulu* in some detail⁵⁵, and although if Taliesin's poetry was in fact written in the sixth century — by no means a certain fact — it would have predated that code, still some educated assumption can be made about Hywel's building on a previous tradition. There is early evidence of some aspects of this relationship by Roman writers: Athenaeus, quoting Posidonius, relates an encounter between a poet and a Celtic king:

...a Celtic poet who arrived too late met Louernius and composed a song magnifying his greatness and lamenting his own late arrival. Louernius was very pleased and threw a bag of gold to the poet, who was running alongside the chariot. The poet picked it up and sang another song saying that the very tracks made by his chariot on the earth gave gold and largesse to mankind.⁵⁶

While the Roman witnesses seem to have found the entire scene bizarrely amusing, it demonstrates well the sort of unspoken contract between hungry poets and kings who did not want their reputations tarnished by satire. To Posidonius, this poet running alongside the cart declaiming the generosity of the host (and his chariot) no

⁵⁴ Lewis, J. Saunders. 'The Tradition of Taliesin.' *Presenting Saunders Lewis*, ed. A.R. Jones and G. Thomas (Cardiff 1973) 145-153, p. 150.

⁵⁵ Jenkins, D. *The Law of Hywel Dda* (Llandysul 1986) 38.

⁵⁶ qtd. in Sims-Williams, 'Gildas', 177.

doubt seemed excessively sycophantic, but in fact both of these characters had acted according to their prescribed roles within society, one generous with coin, the other with words.

Urien is credited with many of the same virtues as the warriors of the *Gododdin*, with one particular exception: victory. He cannot, after all, be the shelter of his country if he dies too soon in defending it, and his ability to defeat his enemies is one of the chief attributes the poet assigns to him. Although poem III begins by calling him generous, a few lines in it takes a turn for the martial, reminding the audience of how much the English have suffered at Urien's hands:

lloegrwys ae gwydant pan ymadrodant
Agheu a gawssant y mynych godyant⁵⁷.

He burns their homesteads and causes them loss and hardship, all while protecting his own people and distributing treasure amongst his warriors and, most importantly to Taliesin, his bard. His name strikes terror into the hearts of his enemies and music into that of his friends.

Taliesin's poems are not epics, and not precisely narratives. Although he describes certain actions, such as Owain's shouting match with Fflamddwyn, he never shows us the actual battle. There are no play-by-play depictions of Urien in contest with man or monster, as one might find in other traditions of heroic verse, but only the lead-up and the aftermath; the glint of sunlight off the shining armour of the king and his soldiers fades into a gruesome mess of bloodstained blades and ravens feasting on the bodies of the fallen. The effect is one that is often more personal than heroic, as the witness describes a first-person account of the consequences of battle:

Gweleis wyr gwydyr yn lluyd
a gwedy boregat brigwic
Gweleis i twrwf teirffin traghedic
gwaed gohoyu gofaran gochlywyd.
Yn amwyn gwen ystrat y gwelit

⁵⁷Williams, Ifor & J.E. Caerwyn Williams. *The Poems of Taliesin*. (Dublin 1987) 3.

gofur hag a gwyr llawr lludedic.
Yn drws ryt gweleis y wyr lletrudyon
eifef dillwg yrac blawr gofedon⁵⁸.

There is no doubt from this description that it has been a very long and exhausting day for everyone involved, and the presence of the narrator himself amid the dirt and dust of the battlefield lends a sense of immediacy and place to the poem. Tradition attributes a similar participation to Aneirin, who in places suggests he was at the battle and that he had been rescued. The first mention of this is in stanza 22:

Ni ddiengis namyn tri o wrhydri fosawd
Dau gatgi Aeron a Chynon daerawd
A minnau o'm gwaetffrau gwerth fy ngwenwawd⁵⁹.

Jarman suggests that this suggests an 'incipient legend' in which Aneirin was wounded at the battle and survived. Not all the stanzas of the *Gododdin* seem to go together: some contradict, others repeat, and it is likely that parts were composed at varying intervals. In this case three survivors are mentioned, including the poet, where several other places state that of three hundred, only one survived. However, some twenty stanzas later comes another digression in which he claims to have not only been present, but to have been rescued from imprisonment:

O nerth y cleddyf clear y'm hamug
O garchar anwar daear y'm dug
O gyfle angau, o angar dud⁶⁰.

Only a few lines before Aneirin has invoked Taliesin, though the line, translated by Jarman as 'I, yet not I, Aneirin (Taliesin knows it...)' says nothing enlightening about the role of bards on the battlefield.

Although Taliesin's voice is present at Gwen Ystrad, he does not attend every battle, especially as he ages, though Urien appears to have a long martial career. Along with the prescribed roles of patron and poet, bard and benefactor, a touching personal relationship appears to develop through the timeline of the poetry of Taliesin

⁵⁸ Williams, *The Poems of Taliesin*, 2.

⁵⁹ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, 17.

⁶⁰ Jarman, *Y Gododdin*, 35.

between himself and his king. Between the grandiose claims and vaulting praises can be found signs of genuine affection, growing more intimate as the two men age, until, in poem V, the praise of Urien's battle prowess takes a back seat to Taliesin's worry over his safety. Is it really praise, after all, to picture his lord dead, laid out on a bier with a bloody face? The image of the poet and Urien's worrying wife (whom he prematurely refers to in the text as a widow) sitting together, fretting, waiting for the war-band's return is a poignant one, if not especially stirring.

The remainder of the poem, when the subject returns victorious and very much alive, is jubilant but subject to an obvious and profound relief, with the writer's worry placed so firmly at the forefront that the tone of it becomes almost a chastisement for worrying them, as a mother might chide a wayward child who has been out too long getting into trouble. It is the most personal of the Urien poems and also the most feminine, as the narrator places himself alongside the grieving wife in the domestic sphere of the hearth rather than accompanying him into battle with the warrior. This time, he has not gone with the warriors, he will not be witnessing the battle firsthand. His role is reduced to that of passive bystander, a potential mourner rather than a comrade-in-arms. Ifor Williams says, 'he had been left at the court, to reflect, to become the victim of his own fears and anxieties. Was the Queen by his side? Did the two, both dependent on Urien, intensify each other's apprehensions?'⁶¹

Dadolwch Urien, is equally familiar, speaking to a long relationship implied between the two. Whether the original falling out was, as Williams suggests, over the two praise poems from Taliesin to another king called Gwallawg, it is clear the bard has said something to upset his patron. Taliesin, however, does not seem to hold any deep fear of their friendship actually being over, and says explicitly, *Vryen nym gomed*. He does not, however, seem to mean this flippantly, for following that

⁶¹ Williams, *The Poems of Taliesin*, 1.

declaration (coming after a formulaic listing of the many wonderful things Urien has done for him) is the touching admission, *nyt oed well a gerwn / kyn ys gwybydwn*. By this time he seems to know Urien quite well, though, for his statement in line 17 that he had been ‘willing to mock an old man⁶²,’ both king and bard have reached a fairly mature age in each other’s company.

Aneirin too expresses a personal interest in the warriors of the *Gododdin*. The affection is not so blatant or encompassing as that of Urien, but touching lines like his assurance to the fallen Owein:

ni bi ef a fi
cas y rhof a thi
gwell gwneif â thi
ar wawd dy foli.

While the words say little beyond the fact that the poet intends to honour his young friend in song, the first couplet hints at the possibility of a troubled past between them, a touching reconciliation, or if none of that, then at least an affectionate relationship between them.

In contrast to the Urien poems or the *Gododdin*, the Llywarch Hen cycle presents a problematic view of the heroic ethos. Its primary flaw is pointed out by Gwên in confrontation with his father: ‘no old man was a coward in his youth.’ If the way to be a hero is to die young, who is left to keep fighting?

In many ways, the medieval view of war was as conflicted as its view on sex. The highest goal was always, it seems, some logistically unattainable constructed ideal in which pure young men rejected sexuality altogether in favour of following their lord into battle, where they would nobly perish. Faced with the dilemma of a culture which also favoured maintenance of a patrilinear line, and the practicality of a

⁶² The line is *kyt ef mynassswyn/gweyhelu henwn*. Williams amends *gweyhelu* to *gweyelin*, a form of the word for ‘twigs’ or ‘rods’, and references a line in *Peredur* which uses a phrase for making fun of him which consists of ‘throwing twigs/rods at’ (Williams 111). I am happy to accept this meaning.

real world in which such behaviour would only result in a lot of dead sons and no fathers to get more — not to mention where these lords were to come from to follow, if the greatest men eschewed procreation — a good deal of time and effort went into justifying the inescapable flaws of humanity. Rowland observes that the *Gododdin*:

...is so successful in advancing this heroic motivation that it is necessary to remind ourselves that fighting to the death was not the norm, in real life or literature. Other heroic material suggests such usually counterproductive behaviour would only occur and be celebrated when an army was cornered with no way to retreat, or if battle could only be avoided with loss of honour.⁶³

This is the dilemma facing Llywarch and his son Gwên in the first poem of the saga. Llywarch sees himself as representative of the old heroic ethos, beginning with an extremely unlikely claim that he can still count as a warrior — *cy bwyf hen as gallaf*⁶⁴ — and the apparent certainty that his son will flee the field at the first opportunity. Gwên repeatedly assures his father that he means to do no such thing, but claims he will be sensible, that, as he says, *porthaf gnif kynn mudif lle*⁶⁵. His cutting, *ny bu eidyl hen yn was*⁶⁶ clearly illustrates the problem inherent in Llywarch's speech: according to the very ideas he espouses, those who survive to grow old are not the strongest, but the weakest, and rather than seek a glorious young end himself, he attempts to deny his changing role. Old men are emasculated, becoming dependent, waiting at home by the fire. When he survives the last of his sons, he is not so different from Heledd: both are mourners, wanderers dependent on others for their continual survival. While once Llywarch was a warrior, his only recourse now is his tongue, the source of female, not male, power. At the same time Gwên, who had begun by questioning the desire for a young and heroic death, is united in it not only with his brothers, but with all the

⁶³ Rowland, J. 'Warfare and Horses in the Gododdin and the problem of Catraeth,' *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 30 (Winter 1995), 13-40, p. 37.

⁶⁴ Rowland, EWSP, 404.

⁶⁵ Rowland, EWSP, 405.

⁶⁶ Rowland, EWSP, 406.

young men drinking mead together in the hall and all the warriors who came before.

Llywarch, by contrast, is alone:

yt uyd llauar gwyr ar [l]lynn
neut diannerch vy erchwyn⁶⁷.

While the young men drink together, bonding over their mead, Llywarch is feminised, emasculated, by being excluded from that masculine space; prohibited not only from the social act of sharing a drink with comrades but symbolically from being a contributing member of the court and society.

It is not, however, only drinking or even slaughter which make a man a man.

While resisting sexuality was important for proper masculine heroics, the capability of it was still important. McNamara notes that:

male sexuality is constructed on the phallus as a symbol of power, a myth that grossly overburdens physical reality. In contrast to the phallic imagery of masculinity, the penis is rarely erect. Thus, the necessary myth of constant, uncontrollable potency has to be ritually strengthened in male gatherings⁶⁸.

This is also denied Llywarch by excluding him from the mead hall; here too he has passed the point of usefulness, and he admits himself:

Y mae heneint yn kymwed a mi
om gwallt ym danned
ar cloyn a gerynt wraged.

It seems fairly clear that when he refers to the ‘knob women used to love’ he means his penis, although the GPC defines *cloyn* as also meaning the pommel of a sword or the boss of a shield — a particularly martial image. And it is without both aspects of his maleness — the martial and the sexual — that he now finds himself, alone and moaning in his bed, deprived of the sons that would have cared for him and the friends that would have sung his praises. This is significantly different from the image of Urien, also an older warrior, who despite his greying hair still sits tall on his horse even though he makes his wife and his friend worry for him in his absence. It is

⁶⁷ Rowland, EWSP, 416.

⁶⁸ McNamara 10.

not age alone that emasculates the warrior, but the lack of a clear goal and the means to reach for it. Even in advanced age, Urien allegedly had the dignity of dying in battle, but for Llywarch, those days are behind him. Contrasting the pictures of these two lords, or again with the dramatic charge of the warriors of the *Gododdin*, sheds some light on why a young and honourable death made, if not a better life, then a more appealing story.

Chapter 2

The Four Branches

The strength of the characterisation is, no doubt, a large part of the reason for the *Four Branches*' enduring appeal. While there is always a place in human society for folktales, stock characters, and Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey, in the end we are drawn to stories because they feature *people* — perhaps fictional, but still possible, with whom we can identify. Gender is but one aspect of this characterisation, but unlike many medieval and early modern works, men and women both are fully formed, independent beings in their own respective rights. The men are not always heroes, neither are they straightforward villains; the women are not always queens or witches. The world they inhabit and their roles within it are complex and changeable, sometimes as a result of their own actions and sometimes under assault from forces outside their control. They navigate treacherous waters according to who society has demanded they become, their actions and reactions based not only on sex but on social standing, ties of family and friendship, and personal motivations. Roberta Valente states that 'gender is an issue...in terms of discussions regarding social behaviour or obligations to other characters, but it is no more important than rank or kinship....'⁶⁹ Women are, in general, more defined by their gender than are men, but uniquely in the *Four Branches*, they are not completely captive to it. Gender roles are subverted as frequently as any other social construction, and with similar consequences: bad things happen when people step outside the roles prescribed for them, when they betray the order of how things should be. Peggy McCracken has noted that '...the idea of a 'natural' sexual difference indicated on the body is part of

⁶⁹ Valente, Roberta. *Merched y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of the Four Branches*. (PhD Thesis Cornell University, 1986.), p. 10.

the ideology that supports the founding institutions of medieval aristocratic society: marriage and children.⁷⁰ In the case of the *Four Branches* I would add to this the institutions of fealty and of friendship, for both play important roles in the characters' motivations. But it is not merely the existence of gender that informs the characters' actions. Nothing exists in a vacuum, and sexual desire plays its part as well; Michael Cichon states that the author 'uses the erotic potential of his tale to convey the message that misapplied passion and lust result in the breakdown of society.'⁷¹ Perhaps most importantly, the give and take of interpersonal relationships is illustrated between both genders in all combinations, leading to the conclusion that both masculine and feminine qualities are necessary not only to maintain society, but to make it flourish.

One of the fundamental contrasts between the qualities of male and female (independent of the body in which they exist) is the difference between action and speech. This dichotomy is dealt with repeatedly in the text, and neither is universally recognised as being more powerful than the other — action must be tempered with wisdom, and sometimes speech must be set aside for straightforward deeds. Pwyll, headstrong and impetuous, has not the power of speech demonstrated by either Arawn or Rhiannon, but he has a good heart, and through his experiences with both of them he learns to listen, and learns, too, when to heed advice. In the Second Branch, Bendigeidfran attempts to secure an alliance with Ireland first by offering up Branwen and then by negotiation, but when these strategies fail, he is prepared to take decisive measures against the threat to his realm.

Of Pwyll and Pryderi, the author of the First Branch tells us:

⁷⁰ McCracken, P. 'The Boy Who Was a Girl.' *The Romanic Review*: 85 (1994) 517-36 p.517.

⁷¹ Cichon, M. 'Eros and Error: Gross Sexual Transgression in the Fourth Branch of The Mabinogi.' *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*. ed. Amanda Hopkins (Cambridge 2007) 105-115, p. 105.

And Pryderi ruled the seven cantrefs successfully, beloved by his realm and all those around him. After that he conquered the three cantrefs of Ystrad Tywi and the four cantrefs of Ceredigion.... Pryderi son of Pwyll Pen Annwfn was occupied with that conquest until he decided to take a wife.⁷²

For such a short section, these few lines, summing up the story that comes before, convey a considerable amount about the characters named. Pwyll, who is dead by the time this passage begins, is not only the lord of Dyfed, but called *pen Annwfn* as well, by virtue of his friendship with Arawn and his year spent in the other's realm. We know from the events of the Fourth Branch that Pryderi will maintain that friendship with Arawn till the end of his life; in that and in the rulership of Dyfed he has taken on the mantle of his father. He is a good man, 'beloved by his people,' because he fulfils his filial obligations and because he has the strength to win the neighbouring lands as well as keeping his own. The story of his conquest ends when he marries, signifying the end of a young king's expansionist goals in favour of a more settled life taking care of his family. Even — or perhaps especially — kings are not exempt from the demands of the hearth.

There are, of course, times when leaving one's own kingdom is called for. Pryderi himself will do so, and find his death, in the Fourth Branch when he leaves Dyfed in pursuit of Gwydion and his stolen pigs. Bendigeidfran leaves Britain for Ireland in defence of his sister, who, as his kinswoman, he is honour-bound to protect even from her husband; having given her away, he still holds some responsibility for her happiness and well-being.

A man's place in society is defined by a cat's cradle of reciprocal obligation and ties of kinship and friendship. Math, a character who knows and follows societal rules to a fault, is forced to march against his friend Pryderi because of the obligation to his sister's son, even though Gwydion instigated the conflict in the first place. He

⁷² Davies, Sioned. *The Mabinogion*. (Oxford 2007). All quotations from the *Four Branches* will be from this edition unless otherwise noted.

does not seem to actually want war with Pryderi⁷³, and it is certainly not in his better interest to engage it in, but the laws dictate his actions, and he puts personal feelings aside in order to protect the stability and prosperity of his kingdom. This is in contrast to Gwydion, who ‘is so intent on setting things up his own way that he is careless of the obligations he owes others as a man in a closely-knit social group.’⁷⁴

In the women, speech — specifically amusing talk — is valued above all other attributes, including beauty. In some cases this takes the form of magical power, such as the *geasa* than Aranrhod places on her son, but in others — Rhiannon’s courtship or Blodeuwedd’s convincing Lleu to demonstrate the circumstances under which he might be killed — it is the force of personality rather than magic. When Pryderi suggests to Manawydan that he marry Rhiannon, he describes her by saying, “‘I am sure you have never heard a woman converse better than Rhiannon. When she was in her prime, there was no woman more beautiful, and even now you will not be disappointed with her looks.’” In a more modern tale, Pryderi would have reversed this argument and led with a claim for his mother’s beauty, but he knows that Rhiannon’s most beguiling feature, and the one most likely to entrance Manawydan, is the allure of her speech. In this he is correct, of course, for the story goes on to describe their meeting:

Then Rhiannon and Manawydan sat together and began to converse; and as a result of that conversation his head and heart grew tender towards her, and he was delighted that he had never seen a woman who was fairer or more beautiful than her.

It is telling, here, that it is first Manawydan’s head, and *then* his heart that ‘grew tender’ towards Rhiannon, that he decides she is the most beautiful woman he has ever seen only after having a conversation with her. Although Manawydan could

⁷³ He did, admittedly, want the pigs, and ask how they could be acquired, so he can’t be considered *completely* innocent, but one does get the idea he didn’t want to fight with Pryderi. Gwydion had told him he meant to ask for the pigs as a bard’s gift, not start a war over them.

⁷⁴ Valente, Roberta. ‘Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the borders of gender in Math.’, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* XXXV (1988) 1-9, p. 4.

certainly be said to possess some more ‘feminine’ qualities himself, as his victory in the Third Branch ultimately comes not from rash action but a carefully-laid plan such as his wife might have come up with, he is very well aware of the obligations of both a lord and of a man within his social group, as demonstrated by his promise to Cigfa after Pryderi and Rhiannon have disappeared:

‘I give you God as my guarantor, that you will never find a truer friend than me, for as long as God wishes it so....I swear to God,’ he said, ‘you shall have the friendship that you want from me, as far as I am able, for as long as God wants us to be I this misery and sorrow’.

Cigfa, who a moment before had ‘lamented that she did not care whether she lived or died,’ brightens right up at this and indeed, claims to have expected it; her tears, while undoubtedly prompted by genuine worry for her husband, acted as a cue for Manawydan to reassure her of his intent to fulfil his obligation both to her, as her kinsman and current lord, and to Pryderi as a friend.

Of course, not all the men in the Four Branches are as conscientious as Manawydan, or as respectful of the wishes of the women around them. Roberta Valente points out that a woman’s consent is necessary to a successful relationship⁷⁵. While Pwyll learns this early on in his dealings with Arawn’s wife, thus preparing him for his relationship with Rhiannon, Gwydion and Gilfaethwy are not so concerned with Goewin’s feelings, or for that matter, anyone else’s including Math’s. The tangle of relationships in the Fourth Branch is complex, dealing as it does with a set of characters who remain stubbornly resistant to attempts to categorise them: Gwydion the sometimes anti-hero, whose devotion when he gives it is absolute even to the expense of the safety of the kingdom; Aranrhod the elusive enchantress, who guards her independence fiercely enough to reject her own children; and Blodeuwedd, the adulterous wife who may never have had a chance to be anything else. In this

⁷⁵ Valente, *Merched y Mabinogi*, 284.

story more than the others, gender is subverted, not only as a social construct but as a biological reality.

The teachings of the early Christian church placed a high priority not only on the consent of both parties but on the wife's sexual satisfaction⁷⁶. A wife's right to sex was included in this implicitly, and female orgasm was considered necessary both for procreation to occur, and to prevent mental disorders such as hysteria⁷⁷. While celibacy had its place, and Pwyll would certainly have been admired for his chastity with Arawn's wife on several counts, the official line wavered often between the need for spiritual purity and the practical need for children as well as a method of dealing with the surfeit of single women produced by large numbers of celibate men. The social attitudes toward sex were conflicted for much of the middle ages, when it came to men of high economic status who were not engaged in the church. Very little value is placed on sexual virility in the *Four Branches*, and McNamara observes that at some points in the middle ages, literature tended toward releasing the males from the compulsion of physical desire, with the responsibility for sexuality resting on the women:

Polite literature exhibited a new focus on women's control over the act of love as well as her control over her courting lover. Woman's right to sex was implicit in the church's emphasis on consent and marital affection as the foundation of marriage.⁷⁸

Pwyll's friendship with Arawn is cemented by his commitment to abstinence, and even after marriage he is not immediately capable of fathering a child on Rhiannon.⁷⁹

Manawydan is likewise attracted to Rhiannon for her conversation rather than any

⁷⁶ McNamara, 10.

⁷⁷ Bullough, V. L. 'On Being a Male in the Middle Ages' *Medieval Masculinities* (ed.) Clare A. Lees, Minneapolis & London, 1994, 31-46, p. 39.

⁷⁸ McNamara, 10.

⁷⁹ Chandler quotes Patrick Ford's suggestion that Pwyll 'exhibits notoriously asexual and infertile characteristics,' 'Prolegomena to a Reading of *The Mabinogi: Pwyll and Manawydan*,' *Studia Celtica* 16-17 (1981-2), 121.

sensual effect her presence has on him,⁸⁰ and maintains a chaste relationship with Cigfa that echoes that of Pwyll and Arawn's wife. Math's marriage to Goewin, which also seems to carry genuine affection or at least respect and duty, is also not a romantic one. The physical liaison has already taken place, though not with the bridegroom, and the marriage is an escape from its consequences rather than an excuse for consummation. When sex does occur, it is often illicit and disastrous; the proper masculine response to sexual desire, and the one most likely to maintain the stability of the socio-political arena, is to resist it. When erotic desire is allowed to rule, such as in the Fourth Branch with Gilfaethwy's lust for Goewin, the consequences are extreme: Gwydion risks war with Dyfed, the life of Math by the corruption of his footholder, and is ultimately forced to submit to a rather extreme and magical punishment. Similarly, Blodeuwedd's adultery with Gronw has implications for the kingdom of Gwynedd: Llew, prohibited from having any other wife, will inherit Math's position without an heir or any way of getting one, and the throne will be contested upon his death in a way that his own existence very narrowly avoided.⁸¹ The stability of the kingdom evident at the opening of the tale is precarious, based as it is on the strength of a king who, while he can hear whispers and turn men into animals, is also incapacitated by peace and quiet. The reasons for his lack of an heir, even after his marriage to Goewin, are not given, but the tale does seem to maintain a theme that stretches throughout the Four Branches of virtuous but childless men and thrones destined to be vacant — Brân's throne, after the murder of Gwern, goes to his cousin Caswallon, and even Pryderi, the single child born in the tales who actually grows to adulthood and inherits such a throne, is still abducted more than once.

⁸⁰ Of course, it may be that Rhiannon is simply too formidable to be considered a really sexual creature and intimidates the men in her life with her presence. It does seem, however, that though she might love them both, it is the mostly-passive Manawydan who is her equal more than the impetuous Pwyll.

⁸¹ It is, however, not explained in the narrative itself why Llew, rather than one of Math's four or five other nephews, becomes his heir, other than by virtue of being a 'main character.'

Problems of succession are a common enough theme in medieval storytelling. Clare Lees reminds us that *Beowulf* ‘opens with a fatherless father with an unknown past and ends with the death of a childless son’⁸² and the motif continues long through the fairytales where old kings are concerned with their lack of male heirs and the dilemma of finding just the right son-in-law to marry to their daughters. Unlike *Beowulf*, the Four Branches do not generally begin with unknown pasts, or if they do, a sense of lineage is at least implied. Since a man without a family history lacked any standing under medieval Welsh law,⁸³ it makes sense in a cultural context to bring the audience in by explaining who it is they are hearing about, even if they are never to be quite clear on what he looks like. Therefore, they begin instead with a clear if brief explanation of who the main characters are; the Second Branch in particular takes some time to establish the family ties of the major characters:

Bendigeidfran son of Llŷr was crowned king over this island and invested with the crown of London. One afternoon he was sitting at Harlech in Ardudwy, at one of his courts; he was sitting...with his brother Manawydan son of Llŷr, and his two brothers on his mother’s side, Nisien and Efnisien....His two brothers on his mother’s side were the sons of Eurosdydd by his own mother Penarddun, daughter of Beli son of Mynogan.

The matter of heirs, however, figures prominently into all four tales and the last does, indeed, end not only with the death of a childless son, but the transfer of rulership to another — forestalling, but not solving, the problem of succession.

Indeed, children, and the status of children and those who care for them, is a recurring motif throughout the Four Branches. The three mothers primarily dealt with in the texts are Rhiannon, Branwen, and Aranrhod, although the giantess Cymidei Cymeinfol, Teyrnon’s wife, and even Gwydion could also be considered in this grouping. Fiona Winward points out that ‘from the evidence...it would seem that motherhood adversely affects standing and influence, since the independence of the

⁸² Lees, ‘Men and Beowulf’, 141.

⁸³ Ford, ‘Opposing Sex’, 27.

mother is directly threatened by the child.’⁸⁴ First among this evidence she mentions is the diminished influence of Rhiannon in the court of Dyfed after her marriage, as her husband’s advisors begin to react with concern to the lack of an heir. Following the abduction of Pryderi even her serving-women ‘have no faith in [her] influence at court....this in itself demonstrates how Rhiannon has fallen in power and status since becoming a wife and mother.’⁸⁵ When she accepts her penance rather than fighting for her acquittal, Winward refers to it as ‘defeatist behaviour,’⁸⁶ a judgement that while no doubt correct, is potentially more complicated than a simple matter of surrendering to her status as a calumniated wife. Rhiannon is a new mother, and one who had waited a long time for a child; the despair she no doubt feels at that child’s being torn away from her by forces beyond her control may justifiably temper her normally characteristic strength. Roberta Valente discusses Rhiannon as a mother as well, citing a perceived difficulty in maintaining balance between the woman as a character and the woman as a euhemerized goddess figure,⁸⁷ but this balance, and the duality it expresses, contributes to the layers of characterisation that make the stories of the Mabinogi so compelling. When Pryderi, now full-grown, is taken from her again in the Third Branch, it evokes sympathy and little surprise that she goes after him. Her son has already been stolen from her once and she herself blamed for it; why would any caring mother, queen or goddess or otherwise, stand by and watch it occur again?

Branwen also suffers after giving birth, as it is only ‘after fulfilling her role as heir-bearer that she is suddenly banished from her husband’s chamber....’⁸⁸ The

⁸⁴ Winward, F. ‘Some Aspects of Women in the Four Branches.’ *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (Winter 1997), 77-106, p. 97.

⁸⁵ Winward, ‘Aspects of Women’, 98.

⁸⁶ Winward, ‘Aspects of Women’, 98.

⁸⁷ Valente, *Merched y Mabinogi*, 1-32.

⁸⁸ Winward, ‘Aspects of Women’, 99.

previous year she is said to have spent in celebration and good company; she ‘gained renown that year, and flourished with honour and companions.’ Yet there were apparently those who were still nursing resentment over the previous encounter, and once she was no longer needed to ensure an heir to Matholwch’s throne, they felt comfortable revisiting old injuries and poisoning her relationship with her husband in a way Pwyll’s advisors had never been able to accomplish.

Like Rhiannon, she loses her child, but not only is she unable to hope for a reunion but she must watch him burn to death in the fire. There is a certain heartbreak to the simple language of this encounter, and the reactions and relative positions of the family:

[Efnisien] takes the boy by his feet, and before anyone in the house can lay a hand on him, he hurls the boy head-first into the fire. When Branwen sees her son burning in the fire she tries to jump into the fire from where she is sitting between her two brothers. But Bendigeidfran seizes her with one hand, and seizes his shield with the other.⁸⁹

It is not only that Efnisien has committed an atrocity against his kin, or that his saintly sister must suffer for it, or even the contrast that his act provides with Bendigeidfran’s, who still remembers his obligations to protect Branwen even from herself. The pathos lies in Branwen’s leap from her place, between the two men who were supposed to be her rescuers and allies, in her thwarted leap and her brother’s quiet strength in pulling her back. For all that the tale is an otherworldly one, rooted in the mythology of Britain and Ireland, it is also the portrait of a family facing betrayal and sorrow.

Given the experiences of Rhiannon and Branwen, it may not seem as strange as it first appears when Aranrhod refuses to acknowledge her own children. W. J. Gruffydd offers up an explanation of her behaviour that traces a possible evolution of

⁸⁹ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 32.

the entire Fourth Branch⁹⁰, but it seems just as likely that, as woman who rejects social constraints, who rules her own court and leads her own life independent of her male relatives, her ‘shame’ is really a justification for the rejection of a maternal role she never wanted in the first place. As the implication in the text is commonly read that her brother Gwydion is the father of at least Lleu, genuine shame is, of course, not entirely out of the question; very few people in any society are eager to admit bearing children by their own siblings. It seems likely, however, that had Aranrhod wanted to keep her baby, with or without acknowledging his father, she would have done so; she is simply not interested in being a mother. Gwydion’s own motivations in offering her up as a replacement footholder are never explained — clearly, he is aware already that Aranrhod is not a virgin, and had he merely wanted to act in a paternal fashion, he and Gilfaethwy have just had three children already, all being fostered by Math. In fact the first child Aranrhod ‘drops’ is also relegated to Math’s care, and though his story is alluded to, he is never dealt with in the narrative again. It is only Lleu, who is only referred to at first as ‘a small thing,’ who evokes this obsessive devotion in Gwydion so that he mirrors the maternal experience abandoned by his sister.

Jo Ann McNamara observed that men of medieval Europe ‘saw abstinence as a means to drop out of the whole power system’⁹¹ and used celibacy as a means to reject the societal constraints placed upon them. Aranrhod, while still a ruler in her own right, has claimed some of this power for herself. According to Vern Bullough, ‘a woman can raise her status and role in society by acting as a man (providing she

⁹⁰ Gruffydd constructs a history of the evolution of the Fourth Branch that makes Aranrhod the original footholder for her father, who has since vanished from the story, and her child a product of incest with him. Through the development of the tale this element vanishes, but keeps Aranrhod’s rejection of her son, leaving it nearly unexplained. See Gruffydd, W. J., *Math vab Mathonwy: an inquiry into the origins and development of the fourth branch of the Mabinogi with the text and a translation*. (Cardiff 1928).

⁹¹ McNamara, ‘The *Herrenfrage*’, 12.

does not show a woman's sexuality) without any threat to society'⁹². It is, of course, the parenthetical that is most important. Aranrhod, by remaining unmarried and claiming to be a virgin, can raise above the implicit weakness of the feminine character and make herself a virtual man, but by exhibiting evidence of her sexuality, she forfeits this distinction. To accept and raise her children would be to reduce herself from ruler to mother, a submission she is unwilling to make.

Valente points out that Aranrhod, 'unlike any other woman in the Four Branches...really commits a violation for which she should be punished, but she walks away from her shame — as well as abandoning the responsibilities she has to the proof of her shameful fertility,'⁹³ and that 'she functions as her own protector,'⁹⁴ keeping for herself the traditional role of a woman's male kin. If motherhood affects autonomy as adversely as Winward suggests, this comes as no surprise:

For a woman who seeks independence as fervently as Aranrhod, who even lives detached in her own fortress, motherhood is necessarily a fate to avoid. Aranrhod seems to understand that...to accept her children would be to compromise her independence and individuality.⁹⁵

This behaviour reminds us that however structured the rules of society are, they exist only because the members of that society are willing to follow them. Unlike Gwydion, who picks and chooses when he will obey the rules and when he will attempt to circumvent them, Aranrhod's freedom lies in a wholesale rejection of the fabric of her societal group as well as her position in it.⁹⁶

Therefore, when Gwydion returns later with Lleu at his side, it is not simply the stigma of her sexuality that she wishes to avoid, but the ties of obligation that go with it. By denying Lleu a place in society, she can prevent anyone from expecting

⁹² Bullough, 'On Being a Male', 34.

⁹³ Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod' 5.

⁹⁴ Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod', 5.

⁹⁵ Winward, 'Aspects of Women,' 100

⁹⁶ Although apparently not enough to keep from encounters with Gwydion that result in children, if that reading is indeed correct.

her to fulfil any perceived obligation toward him; if he does not exist, she remains free. Aranrhod and Gwydion are two of a kind at times, both living by their own rules and determined to control the world around them. Aranrhod has more success at this than Gwydion, in part because of her willingness to abandon completely the societal ties that would otherwise bind her.

But like the other women of the *Four Branches* it is her speech which gives her power. The *geasa* she places on Lleu are as firmly magical as the transformations inflicted on Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, but while Math, in stereotypical male fashion, hits things with his staff to effect enchantment, all Aranrhod need do is speak.

Gwydion's power too lies in his words. He is, after all, 'the greatest storyteller in the land,' and it his word-play that defeats Aranrhod's first two prohibitions and his *englyn* that lures Lleu back to the earth. But Gwydion crosses the line between male and female both literally and metaphorically throughout the course of the narrative: when he is changed into the form of a wild sow and bears a son by his younger brother, when he mirrors the experience of birth by drawing the infant Lleu from the chest, and when he and Math usurp the female power of fertility to create Blodeuwedd out of flowers. He remains fundamentally the same creature throughout, clever and devoted when he chooses to be, devious and self-interested as a rule, irrespective of his gender or the social obligations who which manhood should bind him. However, as Catherine Byfield argues:

...his behaviour throughout the tale is rooted in an obsessive determination to arrange the events and people around him to his own liking; the single-mindedness with which he pursues his aims, and his disregard for social or familial obligations, demonstrates his amoral nature.⁹⁷

The two of Gwydion's 'children' whose lives he has the most hand in, Lleu and Blodeuwedd, are both kept as passive puppets for the earlier part of their lives.

⁹⁷ Byfield, Catherine E. 'Character and Conflict in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi.' *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* XI (1993), 51-72, p. 67.

Lleu spends his youth following Gwydion around, Blodeuwedd is created as a partner for him. It is not until the outside influence of Gronw that either really acquires any voice in the text; Lleu offers up no opinion on the beautiful maiden his uncles have made for him and Blodeuwedd says nothing at all. This lends her adulterous affair a certain amount of sympathy; rather than a scheming temptress aiming to cause her husband dishonour, her love for Gronw is that of a woman suddenly awakening from the dream of a borrowed life and becoming her own person. Adultery holds consequences, both for the lovers and the social group of which they are apart, but Blodeuwedd, unlike the real humans, has not been raised through her life to respect those ties. Her main influence has been Gwydion, who ignores them when it suits him, and Gronw's appearance in her life must have been like a window opening, the sudden realisation that there is more possible in her life than what the magician has planned for her. It is unfortunately Lleu who suffers for it, he who has so far done nothing whatsoever; the thing that spurs him into action is the need for revenge on Gronw. No conversation between Lleu and his wife is seen until she has begun to ask about his possible death, and he answers her questions with an eager readiness that suggests a profound loneliness and need to be loved, rendering what follows all the more tragic. Byfield states again that 'perhaps Gwydion's tragedy is that neither his determination, his genius for intrigue, nor his magic are sufficient to redress the ill consequences of his actions'⁹⁸ and once again, he is left trying to patch up the misfortunes of his own making. Valente says:

Gwydion may be able to nurture and shape a real boy into a chieftain, but he cannot succeed entirely at directing a woman, even one of his own making. Crossing the gender functions in the Fourth Branch leads to legal violations, and men and women who refuse to recognize their roles bring shame to themselves or insult those close to them.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Byfield, 'Character and Conflict,' 68.

⁹⁹ Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod' 9.

While it is clear that the chief lesson of the *Four Branches* is one of obeying societal regulations and maintaining order, it is notable that the tales achieve their objective not by an Everyman or by personifications of virtues and vices, as do some later works, or by stock portrayals of archetypal heroes and villains, but by the trials and tribulations of genuine people with whom one can empathise and relate to, characters who, despite Otherworld origins and magic wands, remain almost painfully human.

Chapter 3:

Culhwch ac Olwen

The earliest work of the Arthurian canon, *Culhwch ac Olwen* is above all else an adventure story, following a band of Arthur's knights as they dash madly about Wales and Cornwall, attempting to get the story's titular character married off to the woman of his dreams. Where the Four Branches are a gender-balanced story in which both male and female powers have their chance at dominance, *Culhwch* is a story about men — men against magic, against witches, against monsters, about brotherhood and loyalty between men, and ultimate masculine victory. At the same time, the impetus for the events of the story are set in motion by the actions of women and the motivation for marriage.. While vastly different in genre from the old heroic sagas, in its own way it recalls the same value system, especially as concerns the sanctity of male unity. C.M. Bowra says that 'a hero's love for his friend is different from his love for his wife or family, since it is between equals and founded on an identity of ideals and interests'¹⁰⁰, and although *Culhwch* is ostensibly about a lovesick young man seeking a bride, this bond between male companions is the driving force of the adventure. The female characters, existing as trophy or obstacle in the warriors' quest, are named only when it is necessary to do so — to establish ties of kinship, lineage, or marriage. Otherwise they are forces to be overcome, from the stepmother's curse on Culhwch that provides an impetus for the action to the Black Witch who proves the most difficult and powerful foe of the story. Fiona Winward explains that

...attitudes in Welsh literature [toward women] are best illustrated by *Culhwch and Olwen*, in which women are easily divided into the troublemakers, represented by various hags and the witch-wife of King Doged, and those placed on a pedestal, represented by the exquisitely described Olwen and the '*merchet eurtorchogyon*' ('golden-torqued women') invoked in Arthur's court.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ C.M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London, 1962,) 64.

¹⁰¹ Winward 77

She does go on, however, to remind the reader that *Culhwch ac Olwen* is a folktale, populated by archetypes rather than fully-drawn characters of either sex.

Brynley Roberts observes that:

...the hero fulfils all his tasks successfully...assisted by helpful companions, e.g. the runner, the marksman, the listener, whose particular abilities enable him to accomplish specific tasks. Though the folk-tale versions of the Giant's Daughter theme progress incident by incident, they have a unified, closely-knit plot, as each task is related to a particular character....¹⁰²

Although each person named has a function to fulfil, some can be examined more thoroughly, and all remain a reflection of the culture that told their stories. In some cases the names change over time, as demand for a particular character grows at the expense of another.

The story begins similarly to other medieval Welsh tales: with the introduction of the family of the chief protagonists. The first female character introduced, Goleuddydd ferch Anlawdd Wledig, is named in order to establish the nobility of her son and his relationship to Arthur. There is a certain inconsistency in medieval Welsh tales regarding the tracing of lineages, and where one might expect a patronymic one sometimes finds the name of a mother instead, where the mother is of some special importance; Mabon ap Modron and Gwydion ap Dôn are both ready examples. Although John Layard claims in *A Celtic Quest* that 'such matrilineal relationships...as 'mythological' elements are in strong contrast to the pronounced patrilinear...nature of its more superficial 'historical' elements,¹⁰³ tracing kinship ties through the mother's line does not actually seem uncommon, and Morfydd Owen sees this not as a remnant of some prehistoric matriarchal society, but of woman as 'transmitter of liabilities and claims...on behalf of children¹⁰⁴.' There is a certain logic

¹⁰² qtd. in Jarman, A.O.H. & G.R. Hughes, (eds.) *A Guide to Welsh Literature vol. 1.* (Cardiff 1992) 215.

¹⁰³ Layard, John. *A Celtic Quest* (Ann Arbor 1975) 3.

¹⁰⁴ Owen, Morfydd E. 'Shame and Reparation: Woman's Place in the Kin' *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. Dafydd Jenkins & Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff 1980) 40-68, p. 57.

in tracing descent through the mother's line, as it is the single familial tie that is virtually impossible to falsify, and a special significance is assigned to the relationship of a man with his sister's sons. Therefore this is an important relationship to establish, and a medieval audience familiar with the legends surrounding Arthur would no doubt recognise that another of Anlawdd's daughters, Eigr (Ygraine), would have been the mother of the High King of Britain. She is also, along with Culhwch's father Cilydd, one of the only characters outside Arthur's immediate circle whose name is reasonably well-known outside *Culhwch ac Olwen*, deriving, as per Evans and Bromwich, 'from the milieu of the Lives and Genealogies of the Welsh Saints,'¹⁰⁵ her function here is to provide concrete legitimacy for the hero of the tale.

However, Goleuddydd has little agency of her own, and attempts to control anything in the world around her fail spectacularly. Her longed-for pregnancy drives her to madness, and she gives birth in a pig-run, without any assistance except for a swineherd. Her attempt to provide for her son after her death by preventing her husband from marrying also ends in failure, but not through her own actions — after all, she is hardly capable of clearing her own grave once she's in it — but rather by the inaction of a man she had trusted with the task. Chandler argues that in *Culhwch* the men triumph at the expense of everyone and everything else, and that this serves as an example of the impotence of the women of the story to control their own lives¹⁰⁶, and to a large extent this seems to be true — neither Culhwch's mother or his stepmother are ultimately able to achieve their ends, the giantess still loses most of her sons to Ysbadadden, and the Black Witch is ultimately defeated; the only woman

¹⁰⁵ Bromwich, Rachel & D. Simon Evans. *Culhwch and Olwen* (Cardiff 1992) xxix-xxx.

¹⁰⁶ Chandler, *Masculinity*, 53.

who can really be read as maintaining a degree of agency over her own fate is Olwen herself.

The relationship of a man with his sister's sons (or in this case, mother's sister's son) forms the basis for Culhwch's having a place at Arthur's court. The recognition of this relationship is symbolised by the haircut he asks for as his gift, an act recognised at least as far as the eighth century as a 'symbolic gesture of paternal affiliation'¹⁰⁷. The scene in *Culhwch ac Olwen* contrasts to an account in the *Historia Brittonum* in which Vortigern, having fathered a son on his own daughter, attempts to pass the blame onto St Germanus¹⁰⁸:

...St. Germanus, taking the child, said, 'I will be a father to you, my son; nor will I dismiss you till a razor, scissors, and comb, are given to me, and it is allowed you to give them to your carnal father[25].' The child obeyed St. Germanus, and, going to his father Vortigern, said to him, 'Thou art my father; shave and cut the hair of my head.' The king blushed, and was silent; and, without replying to the child, arose in great anger, and fled...¹⁰⁹

Similarly in Irish legend, Conchubar assumed the responsibilities of fostering Cúchulainn by soothing his hair. Grooming is a motif that appears often in *Culhwch*; there is much talk of shaving beards and cutting hair especially between the mortals and the giants. Here the author uses it as a ritual of familial recognition to settle his hero into place at the court, and in contrast to Vortigern, Arthur, while trimming Culhwch's hair before they have even been introduced, asks for his name by saying, 'My heart warms toward you. I know you are of my blood'.¹¹⁰

The cutting of hair holds other connotations for medieval Celtic masculinity, and figures heavily into the tale. For Arthur to trim his cousin's hair is not only acceptance of a familial bond for Arthur, but an act of submission by Culhwch and an

¹⁰⁷ Chandler, *Masculinity*, 42.

¹⁰⁸ Another reading of this passage would be simply that Vortigern is giving his grandson over to the saint for fosterage, a position which Roger Vermaat says 'is an honoured position, and...actually a sign of good relations between the two men.' See Vermaat, Richard. 'The Family of Vortigern.'
<http://www.vortigernstudies.org.uk/>.

¹⁰⁹ HB 39.

¹¹⁰ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 183.

acknowledgement of Arthur's authority over him. A monk's tonsure upon entering the monastery was a sign of subservience to God over earthly vanities, and James Stewart describes how Julius Caesar required the Gauls to cut their hair in deference to him as their commander.¹¹¹

But the hair on top of a man's head, significant though it may be, is nowhere near the marker of manhood that is his beard. So important is the beard that there exist entire sections of early law, not only in Wales but in England and Ireland, about what one is permitted to do with it. One of the very few legally legitimate reasons for a medieval Welshman to strike his wife was if she wished shame on his beard, and there were legally demarcated fines for shaving a man without his permission — clearly was this an insult far more severe than the accepted social norm, but for such a thing to be codified into law, there must have been a certain number of prior incidents in which men ran about cutting one another's beards off. The act of doing so is one of emasculation, of forced rather than voluntary submission, but to be bare-faced and well-groomed is also to be civilised. The conquest of the barbarian unknown is an easy enough allegory for the popular trope of shaving the beards of giants, an act which occurs twice within *Culhwch*: not only in the final climax of the story in which Goreu avenges his family and earns his place in the war-band by killing Ysbaddaden himself, but in the encounter with Dillus Farfog (even his name places significance on the beard), a task which the father of the bride explains will be impossible because '[the hair] will be of no use unless it's taken from his beard while he's alive...and he will not allow anyone to do that to him while he's alive.'¹¹² It is, in the end, not merely a hair that Cai and Bedwyr take, but instead, they trap him, shave him entirely, and then kill him. A similar story is told in Welsh legend of Arthur and the giant

¹¹¹ Corson, R. *Fashions in Hair — The First Five Thousand Years* (London, 1965) 95.

¹¹² Davies 199.

Rhudda, who made a mantle from the beards of the warriors he had killed, until of course Arthur slew him. As *Culhwch ac Olwen* is a story about the triumph of a band of men over the otherworldly forces that threaten them, all this grooming and shaving plays into a central theme of control, power, and the domination of outside forces.

The female characters are not so well-delineated. The next woman we meet in the narrative has no name of her own, and no explicit function beyond the personification of the ‘wicked stepmother’ trope. Culhwch’s noble identity and connection to Arthur has already been established by the name of his deceased mother, but as she is unlikely to inflict the same *geas* upon him that his stepmother will, she had to be removed from the story. Culhwch’s father Cilydd marries ‘the wife of King Doged,’ a sentence or two alluding to the assassination of the woman’s husband and the forced marriage she was subjected to. Her function in the story is one so simple it does not require her to have her own identity at all, and the traditional scholarship seems to accept the view of her as evil-minded and bitter, an antagonist in the story — yet in glimpses of her through a perhaps incomplete text, she emerges as a sympathetic minor character fearful for her own future as a once-widowed matron. In the scene that leads up to her confrontation with her stepson, the new queen is walking alone near the house of a hag. Whether she was seeking the hag out or merely seeking time alone away from her new husband and his court is not significant enough to the narrative for the author to explain, but either way, there is the sense that all is not right and well for King Doged’s widow. Indeed she says as much, when she appeals to the older woman for some word of encouragement about her plight. It seems likely from the narrative left us that some of the story is missing in this encounter — not at all an unusual occurrence for *Culhwch ac Olwen*, where loose ends are left blithely untied at the conclusion of the narrative and plot points and

characters vanish into thin air. It seems inconsistent that she should be so bothered by Cilydd's childlessness, when it means, as the hag says, 'he may get an heir on you, as he hasn't on anyone else'¹¹³ and it seems would secure her position in the court. She may be looking at the situation from another perspective, however: her conversation with Culhwch makes clear enough that she wants her own dynasty and her daughter's future secured, and she might have hoped for her new husband to already have a son for that very reason. It also seems probable that she simply doesn't want to bear children to a man she did not choose and does not appear to like, who abducted her and killed her husband. McNamara and Wemple explain the dilemma of a woman expected to provide for her children's future, that 'the protecting mother was all too often found to be simultaneously acting the wicked stepmother'¹¹⁴ as they attempted to secure the position of their own children against that of former and future wives. Some women, as Erler and Kowalski describe, could wield considerable influence, especially if it supported male authority, but the family unit remained the dominant motivating factor, as 'wives and mothers commonly worked to advance the interests of their husbands and offspring'.¹¹⁵ In this case it is her own child, and not her husband's, that the queen works to benefit, and as such her influence has power only as long as it serves the story.

The hag, whose function in the narrative is as explicit as the queen's, appears to be missing some parts of her conversation. In the same breath, she claims Cilydd is prophesied to have a son, doesn't yet have one, and then that he does.¹¹⁶ This incomprehensible exchange seems to raise the queen's spirits, however, at least until

¹¹³ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 180.

¹¹⁴ McNamara and Wemple, 'The Power of Women Through the Family in Medieval Europe, 500-1100', *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. ed. Mary Erler & Maryanne Kowalski. (Athens, GA & London, 1988) 91.

¹¹⁵ Erler and Kowalski, 'Power of Women', 10.

¹¹⁶ 'The hag said, "You need not worry about that. It is prophesied that he shall have an heir; he may have one by you, since he hasn't had one by anyone else. Don't be sad either — he does have one son.'" Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 180.

the adolescent Culhwch rejects the idea of marrying her daughter until he's at least older.

Like Goleuddydd, the new queen is motivated by the impulse to protect the future of her child. Like other women in early Welsh literature, she has access to power through the force of her words, and her simply-pronounced curse on Culhwch that he 'shall never strike against a woman until [he marries] Olwen daughter of Ysbaddaden Bencawr' it is enough to render Culhwch compelled, and for 'every limb in his body' to be filled with desire for a girl he has never seen, or indeed probably heard of until this moment. In the early middle ages, lovesickness was considered a feminine disease but one most likely to affect males, in other words, it took perfectly good men and made them like women. In order to reassert their masculine natures and be free of the disease, sexual intercourse was the recommended cure.¹¹⁷ Given that he is under a curse, it seems unlikely that such a simple solution would have worked for Culhwch, but the transformation he goes through almost immediately is remarkable, from telling his stepmother he is too young to consider marriage, and likely women at all, to being overwhelmed with longing. In *Merched y Mabinogi*, Roberta Valente demonstrates a strong Celtic tradition of women whose 'chief power emerges through words, which should come as no surprise, given the physically limited world the noble woman in medieval romances and folk literature inhabits.'¹¹⁸ The power of a mother to affect the fate of a son is attested in other tales, in particular the Fourth Branch, where Aranrhod places a curse on Lleu similar to that on Culhwch — for the latter, he shall have no wife but Olwen, but on Lleu the prohibition is against marrying a woman 'of any race now on earth.' In the Four Branches this manipulation is nuanced and the characters fully-formed; *Culhwch ac Olwen* is

¹¹⁷ Bullough, 'On Being a Male', 38-9.

¹¹⁸ Valente. *Merched y Mabinogi*, 67.

simply not that sort of story. The wife of King Doged, rather than being an evil witch in possession of powers any more unusual than half the knights in Arthur's court, is using the single power the literary tradition has left her with, avenging the upheaval in her life by denying her stepson his future. But unlike Aranrhod, whose curse proves complicated to undo even for her sorcerer relations and ends in a good deal of pain for all, Culhwch's fate is one that is easily avoided. Chandler observes that it is Culhwch's father who first presents an answer to the problem — that, presenting a picture of 'an assertive man, comfortably in control',¹¹⁹ he does not seem fazed or even terribly bothered by the idea of his wife placing curses on his son, and that from this point on, the men of the tale have things well in hand. Olwen, despite the connotations of her name, cannot be created from flowers; the solution is a far more straightforward one of running about the countryside collecting treasures and defeating monsters until victory can be achieved and the boy can at last marry the girl.

Arthur is not Culhwch's only cousin on his mother's side, and once the party encounter the shepherds, the family tree grows a few more tangled branches. The shepherd Custennin, brother of Ysbaddaden Bencawr, is married to a giantess who, upon hearing of Culhwch's arrival and his quest, 'was happy that her nephew, her sister's son, had come to her.'¹²⁰ This makes her an aunt to both Culhwch and Olwen, and the episode introduces her son Gorau, who is recognised in the Triads as a cousin of Arthur and also as the one responsible for rescuing him from imprisonment no less than three times, though his name is unknown elsewhere:

Ac y sef oed y Goruchel Garcharawr hwnnw, Arthur. A'r un gwas a'e gollygawd o'r tri charchar hynny. Ac y sef oed y gwas hwnnw, Goreu vab Kustenin y geuynrderw.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Chandler, *Masculinity*, 52.

¹²⁰ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 191.

¹²¹ Triad 52; Bromwich, R. *Triodd Ynys Prydein* (Cardiff 2006)146. .

The influence of a mother on the fate of her son has already been discussed, but here it is approached from a somewhat different direction. Gorau's mother is not interested in keeping him under her control, in limiting his marriage options or his ability to grow into a man; she is only concerned with keeping the last of her many sons alive. Although her husband credits her with the power to ruin him, and she certainly has strength of her own, still she has been unable to protect twenty-three of her sons from being killed by her brother-in-law, Ysbaddaden. But when the opportunity arises for Gorau to grow up, she lets him go, requiring only the assurance Cai gives, that 'neither...will be killed unless we both are.'¹²² If it is indeed a the mother who prepares her son for his place in the world, then it is no wonder that under her formidable influence, Gorau is the one who ultimately succeeds in killing Ysbaddaden.

On the immediate surface, this new daughter of Anlawdd Wledig fulfils the same function as her deceased sister: she establishes a link of kinship between major male characters. Her name, which is not revealed or probably even invented, is less important than the familial lines which connect her father, her husband, the protagonist, and his soon-to-be wife. Her connection to Arthur and Culhwch provides an easily accessible reason for her son to be included in the company, in order that he might later kill Ysbaddaden and avenge the ruin of his father and the deaths of his twenty-two brothers. But Custennin's wife makes another connection, as well. It is clear from the text she is a giantess, and not merely a beautiful giant's daughter like Olwen but the genuine article, capable of wreaking destruction without intending to:

She ran joyfully to meet them. Cai snatched a log from the wood-pile, and she came to meet them to try and embrace them. Cai placed a stake between her hands. She squeezed the stake until it was a twisted branch. 'Woman,'

¹²² Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 192.

said Cai, ‘had you squeezed *me* like that, it would be useless for anyone else ever to make love to me.’¹²³

Since Cai has magical powers enabling him to make himself ‘as tall as the tallest tree¹²⁴,’ the idea of crushing him implies a certain abundance of physical strength. But the danger to his person and his humorous reaction to it, while entertaining, is not the significance of the passage. The giantess is welcoming them into more than her home. The heroes have left the security of Arthur’s court and entered another sort of world entirely, the wild and untamed fringes of Britain, a place populated by giants and witches, monstrous boars and supernatural hounds. ‘Giant’ is a term used frequently in old Welsh stories, and is not used exclusively to refer to great size, but rather a supernatural origin; thus Eigr and Goleuddydd, Olwen and Gorau travel amongst the civilised folk of Britain whilst Custennin’s wife, and Dillus Farfog, and Ysbaddaden himself display the more explicit properties of giants and exist outside the borders of the cultured, cultivated world.

In this barbaric, untamed place walks Olwen herself. Her obvious function as a character is to be the love interest of Culhwch, as winning her is the catalyst for the rest of the story, but while he has been ‘filled with love of her’ since his first introduction to the text, she shows no particular strong feelings one way or the other about him. She is a collection of metaphors and generic descriptions, and because the attributes assigned to her are those the audience has learned to associate with beautiful maidens, well then, Olwen must be beautiful. Description in Celtic stories is frequently hyperbolic and not actually given to forming a mental picture of what a character looks like — consider the rather grotesque description of the Irish hero Cúchulain, with his tri-coloured hair, polychromatic facial moles, and seven-pupilled eyes:

¹²³ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 191

¹²⁴ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 189

A handsome lad was he that stood there, Cúchulainn son of Sualtam. Three colours of hair had he; next to his skin the hair was brown, in the middle it was red; on the outside it was like a diadem of gold; comparable to yellow gold was each glittering long curling splendid beautiful thread of hair, falling freely down between his shoulders. About his neck were a hundred tiny links of red gold flashing, with pendants hung from them. His headgear was adorned with a hundred different jewels. On either cheek he had four moles, a yellow, a green, a blue and a red. In either eye he had seven pupils, sparkling like seven gems. Each of his feet had seven toes, each of his hands seven fingers; his hands and feet were endowed with the clutching power of hawk's talons and hedgehog's claws.¹²⁵

Fortunately for Olwen, the Welsh writers tend toward more restraint, and her colour palette, at least, is limited to the white, gold and red that adorn most such heroines.

While other medieval ladies have gone to varying degrees of effort for the cause of the men they love, Olwen is willing only to advise, and while she is accommodating to him, she does not display the same sort of immediate lovesickness that he does. This is not to say that she dislikes Culhwch, but merely that she does not fall headlong into her role as the girl to be got, but shows rather more agency than is at first apparent. She refuses to run away with Culhwch, and instead gives him advice on how to deal with her father in courting her, perhaps interested in determining for herself whether this young man is worthy of her attention — if he succeeds, after all, he will have proven himself willing to go to very great lengths to have her. Had she not been at least interested, she could have gone home and warned her father that Arthur's men were coming, but instead she keeps silent and allows them to dispose of Ysbaddaden's sentries and guard dogs on the way. Like other Welsh heroines, she uses speech to effect control, by advising Culhwch, but she also uses silence. Olwen is aware that her marriage will mean the death of her father, but rather than attempting to either hasten or prevent this eventuality, she merely makes certain that no man who is not worthy will be the one to bring it about. While there is little seen of the relationship between father and daughter, it is a plausible scenario that they even

¹²⁵ Hull, E. *The Cuchulain Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898)

came up with the tasks together, considering how many of them are meant to give her the perfect wedding feast. The catch, which is not lost on Ysbaddaden, is that it is not Culhwch who achieves all the things that would prove himself worthy of Olwen, but Arthur, who first wins the girl and then gives her away.

The supremacy of Arthur is further demonstrated by the conflict with another female: the Black Witch, to find whom the adventurers have to journey to the ‘uplands of hell’¹²⁶. The author is inconsistent in how much time and ink he is willing to devote to playing out the battles, and this is one of the longest in the tale. Having reached the witch’s cave, Arthur’s men advise him to send in his two servants to fight her (the fact those same servants just died chasing the Twrch Trwyth is apparently irrelevant; it’s that sort of story). The servants and the witch get into a brawl and the defeated men flee the cave screaming. Arthur, we are then told, is angered at seeing his two servants almost killed, despite the fact he was the one who sent them in. Again his men advise him to send someone else, and these two too are almost killed, ‘so that God knows how any of the four could have left the place, had it not been for the way they were all put on Llamrei, Arthur’s mare’¹²⁷. The Black Witch appears to be quite monstrous herself; she lives in a cave and attacks the first servant by pulling him to the ground by his hair. No fight with or between women is ever considered civilised and this is no exception; it is a, screaming, biting, dirty mess. The inability of the first four men to triumph over this raw, dark feminine power only serves to highlight Arthur’s achievement in doing so, and his status as not only a warrior and a man of action, but as the recognised leader of the group. Once again, he has struck down a part of the barbaric fringe of Britain and brought it under his control.

¹²⁶ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 212.

¹²⁷ Davies, *The Mabinogion*, 213.

The portrayal of gender in *Culhwch ac Olwen* stems from the dilemma of the feminine power of speech with the masculine capacity for action. As in the Four Branches it is their words that give women power, but in this case speech is not enough. It is not only the women who attempt to make use of the power of words: Culhwch makes a great fuss about cursing Arthur and his court if he is not allowed in the door, and Ysbadadden's extensive list of tasks is meant to intimidate the heroes from attempting to accomplish them. But in an adventure story, words alone mean very little without the ability to act on them.

Final Observations:

We Band of Brothers

In portrayals of the old 'heroic ethos', there exists a clear demarcation between the lives of men and those of women. They are seldom seen or discussed together, but rather, each gender symbolises a different space or action. Men are order, action, reason and the battlefield, and their destinies, even when tragic, are an illustration of the ideal and pinnacle of masculinity. Rowland says of the death of Gwên ap Llywarch that

in the end...it is heroic virtues which prevail... This triumph of heroism is all the stronger for having originated...in human folly and tragedy. Although Gwên's choice, forced upon him by Llywarch, is a bad one which leads to the workings of fate, his conscious decision to accept this fate and fight bravely within its strictures restores his self-determination.¹²⁸

Similarly, the warriors of the *Gododdin*, whatever circumstances led them to battle, are forced into a desperate situation but celebrated for their choice to keep fighting despite odds they can never surmount. There is an inherent nobility in heroic man that lasts only so long as his ability to forge his own fate; old age and its inevitable dependence mean, as for Llywarch himself, a decline in his masculine status. By contrast women are chaos, emotion, and the domestic hearth; occupants of an othered space shared by those incapable, whether by age or sex, from taking part in the lifestyle of battles and mead-drinking that would bring them glory.

Meanwhile the women, while not found taking arms on the battlefield, are not entirely without agency; rather their power and influence are rooted in the domestic sphere on which their authority is dependent. This becomes more apparent in the Four Branches, where both men and women are expected to understand and fulfil the obligations inherent in their position within their social group, and the story can only

¹²⁸ Rowland, EWSP 38.

reach an unproblematic conclusion when these obligations are navigated responsibly. The characters and their relationships are used to illustrate right action, and to warn away from modes of behaviour that would unbalance the familial and social unit. A weakened family group would be vulnerable to outside forces, and through upholding kinship obligations are the social and legal systems upheld.

In *Culhwch ac Olwen*, the presence of Arthur renders Britain itself unassailable, and the narrative works on a smaller scale, dealing with the relationship of the *teulu* and the warriors' loyalty to each other. Within this group dynamic are challenges enough; Arthur's mocking words to Cai are enough to drive him from this 'band of brothers' permanently, and not all of the warriors are careful with each other's lives. Female power is a force to be overcome, both in the beginning of the story and its climax, but has little actual effect on how events unfold; it is the actions, positions, and relationships between men that are fully explored.

The treatment of each gender, it seems, is determined by the level of characterisation in the work itself and the function of the narrative. When the text is populated by archetypes, symbols, and larger-than-life figures, the male and female spheres are fully separate and come together only to prove a point, usually the superiority of one group over another. A more deeply nuanced characterisation will bring the sexes together as individuals, involving more details of social, political and familial factors.

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