

The women of the *Mabinogi* – whose personalities range from the mysteriously elusive to the humorously practical – are among the most vivid characters in the world of the Four Branches.

Do you agree? In your answer you should refer in detail to at least FOUR characters that appear in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*. What specific techniques are used in relation to characterization?

Of all the characters in the tales collected under the name, *Y Mabinogi*, those in the Four Branches are far more vivid and fully realized than the others. And within the Four Branches, the modern reader cannot help but be struck with the vividness of some of them, both male and female, such as Rhiannon, Blodeuedd, Aranrhod, Gwydion and Efnysien. In fact, from this point of view some of the men are just as vivid as the women. But when examined through the eyes (or ears) of a medieval Welsh audience, the significance of the female characterizations becomes even more pronounced, lending them a depth and vividness that surpasses the men.

In *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* women manipulate men in sophisticated ways, men try to keep women subjugated (often brutally), though sometimes they fail, and there is a frequent jockeying for position between them that can be quite entertaining. Andrew Breeze even

stated that, ‘the *Four Branches* can thus be seen as that rare thing, a feminist fairy tale’.¹

While this may be an exaggeration, it certainly sums up many of the motivations of the female characters in these tales.

Characterization Techniques

The characters in the Four Branches reveal themselves in at least four ways.² One way is through the things that the author tells us directly, which are those things that we could not know otherwise. One example of this would be in The First Branch where Pwyll has returned to Dyfed from his stay in Annwfn and we’re told,

And because he had stayed that year in Annwfn, and had ruled there so successfully, and united the two realms through his courage and prowess, the name Pwyll, prince of Dyfed, fell into disuse, and he was called Pwyll Pen Annwfn from then on.³

From this we have learned that because of his fighting abilities, Pwyll now has earned the title ‘Head of Annwfn’ which is greater than just being prince of Dyfed. His status and stature among his own people has grown.

Another way that we can discover the motivations and character of a person in the tales is through their own actions. In the Third Branch, Pryderi and Manawydan are hunting a

¹ Andrew Breeze, ‘The Mabinogion’ in *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997).

² Catherine E. Byfield, ‘Character and Conflicts in the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 40 (1993), 51-72 (p. 52).

³ Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

boar when they come across a newly built, towering fort. Manawydan warns Pryderi not to enter, but he goes in anyway. Inside he sees a golden bowl, and,

He was enraptured by the beauty of the gold and the fine workmanship of the bowl.

And he went to the bowl and grabbed it.⁴

This shows us that he has a greedy side. And his greed gets him trapped in the castle. Indeed, this greed will bring about his death in the Fourth Branch.

A third way of discovering characterization and motivation is through interplay between the characters that shows how they are foils for, or compliment each other. The Second Branch demonstrates this idea well in the characters of Bendigeidfran (Bran) and Matholwch. Though both are kings, it is Matholwch who comes to Wales in search of a wife from Bran, intimating that Bran has the higher status, and Bran deals honourably with everyone. Later, Matholwch's compliance with his nobles' demands to expel Branwen from his chamber, reducing her status to that of a servant, and his later attempted treachery against Bran after suing for peace only makes the contrast between the two men even starker.⁵

A fourth technique to show character is through the use of dialogue. Here we can discover how the characters perceive themselves and each other. There is a good example in the Third Branch when Manawydan, Pryderi, Rhiannon and Cigfa have to go to England to make a living. In Hereford they take up saddle-making, and are so successful that the local saddlers decide to kill them to eliminate the competition. After receiving a warning, Manawydan and Pryderi discuss what to do,

⁴ Davies 2007, p. 40.

⁵ Byfield, p. 57.

‘Between me and God,’ said Pryderi, ‘my advice is not to leave the town but rather to kill these churls.’

‘No,’ said Manawydan, ‘if we were to fight them, we would get a bad reputation and would be imprisoned. It would be better for us to go to another town and earn our living there.’ Then the four of them went to another city.⁶

This simple exchange shows us that Pryderi is impetuous and quick to fight, while Manawydan is more cautious and thoughtful. These two lines of dialogue point up quite a clear contrast in their characters.

From this we see that a lot can be learned about a character in the Four Branches just by paying attention to what the author says about them, by seeing what they do and say, and by noting comparisons made between them. These techniques give the stories depth and sophistication and are the reason that the characters are perceived so vividly. For the purposes of this essay, I am going to examine the characters of Efnysien, Gwydion, Rhiannon, Blodeuedd and Aranrhod.

Efnysien

On the surface, the character of Efnysien in the Second Branch seems out of control and even sociopathic in his behaviour. And as a result he is quite striking. While Efnysien reveals much about himself through his actions, he is the only character in the Four Branches who also reveals himself through his own thoughts.⁷ He does this just before he commits the acts that shock us so much. Early in the tale, Bendigeidfran agrees to give his sister, Branwen, to

⁶ Davies 2007, pp. 37-38.

Matholwch, the king of Ireland, in marriage. A great celebration ensues, and Efnysien comes across the place where Matholwch's horses are being stabled. When told whose they were, and why Matholwch was in Wales, Efnysien remarks (to himself),

‘Is that what they have done with such a fine maiden, and my sister at that, given her away without my permission? They could not have insulted me more,’ he said.

He then acts and takes out his knife and maims the horses terribly,

He went for the horses, and cut their lips to the teeth, and their ears down to their heads, and their tails to their backs; and where he could get a grip on the eyelids, he cut them to the bone.⁸

Later in the tale, this destructive act is the excuse needed by the Irish lords to have Branwen turned out of the King's chamber and into the kitchens, which precipitates the war between Wales and Ireland. The Irish manage to get Bendigeidfran to agree to peace by offering to make Branwen's son king and to build a house for Bendigeidfran that he can actually fit into (since he's a giant). But the treacherous Irish hide 200 men in sacks of flour hanging on the pegs of the columns of the house, and it is Efnysien who discovers the ploy. He ‘prodded the bag until he found the man's head, and he squeezed the head until he could feel his fingers sinking into the brain through the bone.’⁹ He goes through the entire group, playing ‘the same game with each of them,’ killing them all, and then he sings an *englyn*,

⁷ Byfield, p. 59.

⁸ Davies 2007, p. 24.

⁹ Davies 2007, p. 31.

‘There is in this bag a different kind of flour,
 Champions, warriors, attackers in battle,
 Against fighters, prepared for combat.’¹⁰

It’s as though he was actually enjoying himself while squeezing the brains out of each man. But it’s later in the story where he commits his worst crime.

Right after Efnysien kills the warriors in the flour bags, the rest of the company enter the hall, sit down, and make peace. The boy Gwern, son of Matholwch and Branwen, is made king of Ireland in Matholwch’s place. Efnysien calls the boy to him and then we hear,

‘I confess to God,’ said Efnysien to himself, ‘the outrage I shall now commit is one the household will never expect.’ And he gets up, and takes the boy by the feet, and immediately, before anyone in the house can lay a hand on him, he hurls the boy head-first into the fire.¹¹

Such atrocities can only appal a modern audience, and Efnysien certainly comes across as a memorable and vivid character. But would a medieval Welsh audience be so surprised, shocked and confused by his actions? Would they have understood what we moderns do not? In the affair of the maimed horses, Efnysien commits the outrage because he has not been consulted about Branwen’s marriage. At the time the tale was written down, only the nearest male relative would have to right to be consulted, or make that decision. But based on evidence in *Kulhwch ac Olwen* this could be a debatable point. In that tale, Kulhwch agrees to give certain wedding-dues to Olwen’s maternal and paternal kinswomen.

¹⁰ Davies 2007, p. 31.

¹¹ Davies 2007, pp. 31-32.

T.P. Ellis argues that in earlier times the right of bestowal in marriage had extended to all relatives, paternal and maternal, within four degrees of relationship.¹² Since the Four Branches are supposedly set in the distant past, it is reasonable that the audience might accept that Efnysien had the right to be consulted, and that he had been wronged by his brother, which justified the maiming of the horses.

After discovering the Irish warriors hidden in the flour sacks and killing them all, the rest of the armies enter the hall and peace is made between Bendigeidfran and Matholwch before Efnysien has the chance to tell his brother about the Irish treachery. It is perfectly natural that Efnysien, angered by the faithlessness of the Irish, would want to exact revenge on their king, who had ordered the sneak attack. But when peace is made, the kingship of Ireland is passed on to the boy Gwern from Matholwch, so if Efnysien is to have revenge against the king, it is now the boy who must suffer. This throws Efnysien's actions into a whole different light, and is something that a medieval Welsh audience might have understood. And to further rehabilitate his character, Efnysien is the person who finally breaks the cauldron of rebirth, stopping the flow of revived Irish warriors in the ensuing battle, and at the price of his own death,

When Efnysien saw the corpses, and no room anywhere for the men of the Island of the Mighty, he said to himself, 'Oh God,' he said, 'woe is me that I am the cause of this mountain of the men of the Island of the Mighty; and shame on me,' he said, 'unless I try to save them from this.'

¹² T.P. Ellis, 'Legal references, terms and conceptions in the Mabinogion', *Y Cymmrodor* 39 (1928), 86-148 (pp. 127-129).

He creeps in among the corpses of the Irish, and two bare-backed Irishmen come up to him and throw him in the cauldron, as if he were an Irishman. He stretches himself out in the cauldron so that the cauldron breaks into four pieces, and his own heart breaks too.¹³

And this allows the Welsh to win the battle. So in the eyes of the medieval Welsh audience, Efnysien, though memorable, might not have seemed as vivid as other characters with his actions being understandable, and certainly not as bizarre and out of control as a modern audience might think.

Gwydion

This great magician character in the Fourth Branch appears totally amoral, using his magical powers to promote evil and to manipulate others to achieve his own ends, provoking disaster.¹⁴ At the beginning of the tale he seems to have no principles at all, unless it be argued that he was only trying to help his brother Gilfaethwy gain Goewin's bed through his love for him.¹⁵ In order to get his uncle Math away from her, Gwydion foments a war between Dyfed and Gwynedd by stealing the pigs that Pryderi had obtained from Arawn, King of Annwfn. Gwydion does this by disguising himself as a poet to gain entrance to Pryderi's court, and there the author tells us something about Gwydion,

¹³ Davies 2007, p. 32.

¹⁴ Byfield, p. 67.

¹⁵ Davies 1993, p. 74.

Gwydion was the best storyteller in the world. And that night he entertained the court with amusing anecdotes and stories, until he was admired by everyone in the court, and Pryderi enjoyed conversing with him.¹⁶

Using his charm and playing on Pryderi's greed, Gwydion convinces him to let him have the pigs in return for stallions and hounds that Gwydion magically conjures up in the night.

When the deception is discovered, Pryderi and his army march north after him. The ensuing war distracts Math, leaving Gilfaethwy and Gwydion free to rape Goewin. But Goewin tells Math about the rape, and he changes Gwydion and Gilfaethwy into three different pairs of animals over three years with each pair giving birth to a baby animal. Each year Math would change the sex of the animals so that each man would be alternately the next baby's mother or father.

But it is in his relationship with his sister Aranrhod that we see Gwydion begin to show signs of humanity. His honest love for his foster son Llew shines alongside his anger at Aranrhod for her refusal to claim her son. When she first refuses to give the boy a name, Gwydion erupts in anger at her,

'By my confession to God,' he said, 'you are a wicked woman; but the boy shall have a name, though it displeases you. And you,' he said, 'it is because of him you are angry, since you are no longer called a virgin. Never again will you be called a virgin.'¹⁷

¹⁶ Davies 2007, p. 48.

¹⁷ Davies 2007, p. 55.

Gwydion goes to great lengths to trick Aranrhod into giving Llew a name, and then arms, and when she curses the boy that he will not have a wife ‘from the race that is on the earth at present,’¹⁸ he again thwarts her by teaming up with Math to create a wife for Llew made of the flowers of broom, meadowsweet, and oak, naming her Blodeuedd (Flowers). This experiment of his is disastrous, however, because she falls in love with another man and plots Llew’s death. Once Llew has been mortally wounded and flies away in the shape of an eagle, Gwydion searches north Wales for him, proving his love and determination. He changes Llew back to human form and has him healed.

Gwydion, though fundamentally amoral, is a striking figure in the tale, and vividly portrayed, primarily through his actions. Instead of killing Blodeuedd for conniving the death of her husband, he turns her into an owl (Blodeuwedd – Flower Face),¹⁹ much as he had been punished earlier by being turned into various animals. Thus, he has moved in a circle – Gwydion the amoral magician has become Gwydion the judge and he has learned the difference between right and wrong.²⁰

The Women of the Four Branches

Gwydion and Efnysien (and the other male characters) are nonetheless operating in a world of men, designed by men to be run by men. The position of women in medieval Wales was a subordinate one. Whereas men would be defined by their titles (indicating their status in society), women were defined by who their male relatives were: their fathers, husbands and brothers. In terms of how much compensation would have to be paid in the case of insult or

¹⁸ Davies 2007, p. 58.

¹⁹ Davies 2007, p. 244 n. 63.

²⁰ Davies 1993, p. 75.

injury, a woman was only worth half of what her brother was worth, and once married, only a third of her husband's worth. And should her honour be affronted, it was up to her male kin (husband, if married) to defend her.²¹ She was not expected to do anything about it herself.

Women had three stages in their lives to look forward to in terms of personal power: that of a virgin, then a married woman, and finally a mother (should she outlive her husband she might become a dowager, but widowhood offered few advantages).²² The women in the Four Branches only seem to have any power when they are single. Once they marry or have sex with a man, their autonomy is severely restricted and motherhood can bring about total irrelevance.²³ For the modern reader who is unaware of how medieval Welsh society worked, these characters might seem merely interesting and entertaining. But for a medieval Welshman, the independence and audacity of these women would have made them stand out sharply in vivid comparison to how society normally worked, making their characters extremely memorable. It is how the women of the Four Branches cope with these societal restrictions that gives them their power in our imaginations, for they are independent, can instigate events and sometimes, like men, even control their own fates.²⁴

Rhiannon

Rhiannon enters the tale not as a lady of the court or as a wife, but rather as entering from an Otherworldly setting. In the First Branch, Pwyll, Pen Annwfn, is sitting on the Mound of

²¹ Roberta L. Valente, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: crossing the borders of gender in *Math*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 35 (1988), 1-9 (p. 2).

²² Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'Gender and Violence in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', in Bernhard Maier, Stefan Zimmer & Christiane Batke (eds.), *150 Jahre "Mabinogion" – Deutsche-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen* (Tübingen, 2001), 67-77 (p. 75).

²³ Lloyd-Morgan, p. 68.

²⁴ Winward, p. 80.

Arberth when a woman wearing gold, brocaded silk and seated on a tall, pale-white horse comes riding by. As the author tells us,

Anyone who saw it would think that the horse had a slow, steady pace, and it was drawing level with the mound.

And then just a little further on in the narrative,

Her pace was no different to the day before. He set his horse to amble, and he thought that although his horse was going slowly, he would catch up with her. But that was futile. He gave his horse its head; he was no closer to her than if he were on foot; and the more he spurred his horse, the further she drew away from him. Her pace was no faster than before.²⁵

What we have learned from the author here is that this woman, Rhiannon, rides a magical horse that cannot be caught, even when it is only walking. The implication is that she may be from the Otherworld herself. She certainly, at least, has access to magic of some kind. And when she speaks with Pwyll, she is apparently making her own choice of whom she will marry,

²⁵ Davies 2007, pp. 8-10.

‘And I am to be given to a husband against my will. But I have never wanted any man, because of my love for you. And I still do not want him, unless you reject me. And it is to find out your answer on the matter that I have come.’²⁶

She certainly is not content to be given away by her male relatives and instead will decide herself. Later, at their wedding feast, Pwyll rashly offers a visitor anything in his power, and the man demands Rhiannon’s hand for he was the one she was supposed to marry. She says to Pwyll,

‘Be silent for as long as you like,’ said Rhiannon. ‘Never has a man been more stupid than you have been.’²⁷

It’s almost as if she has started to reconsider her choice of him as a husband. But Rhiannon takes charge, tells Pwyll how to handle the situation, and even arranges the solution to the problem at the next year’s feast. She seems to manage situations better than any of the men. Considering how competent, strong and magical she is, one would think that she wouldn’t have to marry at all, but the tale exists in a world where the assumption is that women must be subservient to men.²⁸

After their marriage, things begin to change. When Rhiannon’s father suggests that she will follow after Pwyll for Arberth at a later date, Pwyll refuses and insists she accompany him. And it is when they get to Arberth that the change in Rhiannon’s status really starts to show. In the third year of their marriage she had yet to give birth to an heir,

²⁶ Davies 2007, p. 11.

²⁷ Davies 2007, p. 12.

²⁸ Lloyd-Morgan, p. 68.

and Pwyll's men grumble and ask him to put her aside in favour of another wife. This fine, magical horsewoman is suddenly in danger of being thrown out! Pwyll puts them off for a year, and she gives birth to a boy. But it's interesting to see whose child he is,

Before the whole period had elapsed a son was born to *him*.²⁹ [italics mine]

The boy is Pwyll's child now, not Rhiannon's. Not even both of theirs, just his. But her character shines through during the events that quickly follow. On the night of the birth, Rhiannon, exhausted, sleeps deeply and the serving women who were charged with watching over her and the boy also fall asleep. In the morning they wake up and discover that the child is missing. They assume that this magical horsewoman cannot protect them from the fury of the men,

'Truly,' said another, 'burning us alive or putting us to death would be too small a punishment for this.'³⁰

So they kill a puppy and smear its blood on her face and accuse her of killing and eating her own baby. Rhiannon treats the women with compassion, promising to protect them, but they do not believe her.

'You poor creatures,' she replied, 'you shall come to no harm if you tell the truth.'

Whatever she said, out of fairness or pity, she received only the same answer from the women.³¹

²⁹ Davies 2007, p. 16.

³⁰ Davies 2007, p. 16.

Pwyll refuses to believe the allegations, but is forced to punish her, and she accepts her punishment stoically. She must offer to carry any visitors to Arberth from the gate to the court on her back, like a horse. Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan sees this as an example of the hatred men have towards women who show independence and deviate from the social norm.³² In any case, this competent and magical woman has gone from being the proud horsewoman who picked her own husband and arranged her own wedding feast to one who is powerless to defend herself against false allegations from other women. And in the Third Branch, while she still shows great prowess in joining the men on their hunting expeditions, she still must agree to marriage with Manawydan, her son's friend, using a stock answer of acceptance because, in fact, she has no right to refuse.³³ In both branches, however, she does not fight against the system, but rather fights within the system to achieve her ends. She is one fascinating and resourceful woman. And her success at being happy against all odds must have resonated deeply with the medieval audience and possibly even more than it does with us.

Blodeuedd

Blodeuedd appears in the Fourth Branch as a response to Aranrhod's refusal to grant Llew Llaw Gyffes a wife 'from the race that is on this earth at present.'³⁴ Since her magic is too strong to break, Gwydion and Math team up and create a wife for Llew out of the flowers of the oak, broom and meadowsweet and she is named Blodeuedd (Flowers).³⁵ After they have

³¹ Davies 2007, p. 17.

³² Lloyd-Morgan, p. 69.

³³ Lloyd-Morgan, p. 70.

³⁴ Davies 2007, p. 58.

³⁵ Davies 2007, pp. 58 and 243 n. 58.

slept together and had their wedding feast, they are given the *cantref* of Dinoding and they set up their seat at Mur Castell. One day when Llew was away visiting the court of Math, Blodeuedd invites a local lord named Gronw Pebr to stay the night, as he was passing and darkness was closing in. However, after he has removed his hunting clothes and they sit down together, the author tells us that,

Blodeuedd looked at him, and from the moment she looked there was no part of her that was not filled with love for him. And he gazed at her, and the same thought came to him as had come to her.³⁶

And it is from this point that Blodeuedd, who had only been a cipher in the story so far (an ideal wife), truly becomes real for the audience.³⁷ We learn from her actions that she is as amoral as Gwydion was, which may be something she had inherited from her maker. While she and Gronw could have carried on their affair in secret, they choose instead to kill her husband Llew so that they may live together openly. And she takes control of Gronw from the beginning, not allowing him to leave until she is ready. And he does as he is told. It is only when he fears for Llew's return that she says,

‘Yes, tomorrow I will *let* you leave.’³⁸ [italics mine]

Gronw may have been the one to concoct the plan to kill Llew,

³⁶ Davies 2007, p. 59.

³⁷ Winward, p. 96.

³⁸ Davies 2007, p. 60.

‘There is only one thing to do,’ he said; ‘find out from him how his death may come about, and do that by pretending to be concerned about him.’³⁹

but it is Blodeuedd who so skilfully deploys it. She uses all her feminine wiles of deception to get the information she needs out of Lleu, and he falls for it. She coaxes him into revealing the secret of his death, and then, pretending to be stupid (perhaps like today’s stereotype of the ‘dumb blond’) she convinces him to show her how his death could be accomplished,

‘Lord,’ she said, ‘I am wondering how what you told me before could happen. Will you show me how you would stand on the edge of the tub and the billy-goat, if I get the bath ready?’⁴⁰

It is interesting to note that all through this part of the tale Blodeuedd never calls her husband by any title, until the time comes when she is trying to coax him into standing on that tub and billy-goat so that Gronw Pebr can kill him, and then she calls him *arglwyd* (lord, ruler) no less than four times. And when speaking to Gronw Pebr, she never refers to her husband by name at all.⁴¹

Blodeuedd is a fascinating character that has decided to completely flout society’s conventions and think for herself. She had no choice at all in whom to marry, as she was created specially to give Lleu a wife, to which she acquiesces until she meets a man she can dominate and love. She might strike the modern reader as being callous and evil, and

³⁹ Davies 2007, pp. 59-60.

⁴⁰ Davies 2007, p. 61.

⁴¹ Byfield, p. 70.

undoubtedly she struck the medieval Welsh audience that way, but another, more sympathetic reading would see her as a woman trapped within a life she did not choose and does not want and who is willing to move heaven and earth in an attempt to determine her own fate. But the patriarchy, in the form of Lleu and Gwydion, ultimately wins when Lleu kills Gronw and Gwydion turns Blodeuedd into an owl (i.e. Blodeuwedd – Flower Face).⁴²

Aranhrod

In the Fourth Branch, Math is in need of a new virgin foot holder. His nephew Gwydion suggests his sister Aranhrod for the job. After asking her if she is a virgin, and getting her reply in the affirmative, Math lays down his magical staff and bids her step over it,

Then she stepped over the magic wand, and as she stepped she dropped a large, sturdy, yellow-haired boy. The boy made a loud cry. After the boy's cry she made for the door, but as she went she dropped a small something.⁴³

Aranrhod was not only lying, but she might also have felt shame (or danger) at giving birth, hence her quick exit. The yellow-haired boy makes for the sea but Gwydion adopts the 'small something' that Aranhrod also dropped when he discovers it is a baby boy. He has the boy nursed and the child grows quickly, so that by his fourth year he is as big as an eight year old, and Gwydion takes him to meet his mother.

Aranhrod has her own court, *Caer Aranhrod*, and she is not married nor, indeed, does she seem to belong to any male relative. In her court she takes on the role of the lord,

⁴² Davies 2007, pp. 58 and 243 n. 58.

⁴³ Davies 2007, p. 54.

welcoming, greeting and banqueting her visitors.⁴⁴ And she obviously has high social status. She is the only woman in the Four Branches having ‘no defined obligatory bonds to any man.’⁴⁵

This part of the Fourth Branch is very much about the antagonism between Aranrhod and Gwydion. When he brings the boy to see her, she is horrified,

‘Alas, man, what has come over you, putting me to shame, and pursuing my shame by keeping him as long as this?’

Gwydion responds,

‘If you have no greater shame than that I should foster a boy as fine as this, then your shame is but a small matter.’⁴⁶

And her shame may be due to the possibility that her brother, Gwydion, may be the boy’s father. The passage in the Welsh goes,

A thrannoeth kyuodi a oruc, a chymryt y uab* gyt ac ef, a mynet y orymdeith gan lann y weilgi rwng hynny ac Aber Menei.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Davies 2007, p. 57.

⁴⁵ Byfield, p. 68.

⁴⁶ Davies 2007, p. 55.

⁴⁷ *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, trans. by Ifor Williams (Caerdydd, Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1930), 79.

And the next day he got up and took the boy* with him, and went walking along the seashore between there and Aber Menai.⁴⁸

Catherine Byfield translates the word *uab* [see the * above] not as ‘boy’, the way Sioned Davies does, but rather as ‘son’. This could imply that Gwydion was the father of his sister’s son. And this would indeed be a cause for shame.

When Gwydion admits that the boy still has no name, Aranrhod swears a destiny on him that he will never have a name unless she give it to him, and when Gwydion tricks her into giving him a name, she swears another destiny on him that he shall never bear arms unless she give them to him. The third destiny she later swears on the boy is that he shall never marry any woman ‘from the race that is on this earth at present.’⁴⁹ This is potent stuff. Not only does she live without the influence of male relatives, and not only does she have her own stronghold named after herself, but she also has the magical power to swear unbreakable destinies on others. This is one powerful lady! She defends herself with a quick wit and manages to evade the birth fine (*amobr*) that she should have paid for having a child and not alleging rape, the only circumstance where a lord would forgo this payment. Indeed, instead of taking action against her, Math solves the problem of Lleu’s wife by working with Gwydion to create Blodeuedd.⁵⁰ Aranrhod is the only woman in the Four Branches who is able to flout social convention successfully and get away with it. No wonder she swears that she has no son, for to admit to one would be to admit to the ties of motherhood (and all that entails), which would force her down into the male world she has so successfully transcended. For a medieval Welsh audience this woman’s success would have been very

⁴⁸ Davies 2007, p. 55.

⁴⁹ Davies 2007, p. 58.

⁵⁰ Winward, pp. 88-89.

extraordinary, indeed unprecedented. And she might have been the most vivid character of them all.

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