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The Four Branches of the Mabinogi: Gwynedd and the Glamorgan Bards

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Abstract: *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi or 'The Four Branches of the Mabinogi', surely the work of an author from Gwynedd or north-west Wales, are twelfth-century tales of love and adventure; and one character in them is Gwydion, a magician of Gwynedd. Amongst his exploits is disguising himself as a poet from Glamorgan (in South Wales) and thereby deceiving a Gwynedd sorceress, who is fooled into welcoming him as a story-teller and entertainer. In a similar way he had already tricked a prince of Dyfed (or south-west Wales).*

Although pure legend, the episodes have a semi-historical parallel in bards who unwittingly produced conflict between Deheubarth (southern Wales) and Glamorgan. According to the antiquary Rice Merrick (d. 1587), the feud was the result of royal passion, as at Troy. Its Helen was the wife of Iestyn (d. 1100?), Lord of Glamorgan; its Paris was Rhys (d. 1093), Prince of Deheubarth. Rhys became obsessed with Iestyn's wife after hearing poets describe her. Yet she was loyal to her husband as Helen was not to Menelaus. Disappointed in his lust, Rhys began threatening his neighbour. Hence an antagonism between Dyfed and Glamorgan that led to disaster for both. The 'Glamorgan bards' in these two narratives are the theme of this paper, with three main conclusions: (a) The sources are evidence neither for the eleventh century nor for the special excellence of verse in Glamorgan; (b) Glamorgan's representation in the Four Branches is consistent with authorship by a member of Gwynedd's ruling house who (through marriage) lived in Dyfed; (c) there is, in contrast, no link whatever between the tales and the Celtic monastery of Clynnog (in west Gwynedd), despite assertions by some.

Keywords: *Wales; Four Branches of the Mabinogi; Welsh Bards; Gwynedd; Glamorgan; Celtic Tradition*.

Résumé : *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi ou « Les quatre branches des Mabinogi », sûrement l'œuvre d'un auteur de Gwynedd ou du nord-ouest du Pays de Galles, sont des contes d'amour et d'aventure du XIIe siècle ; et un personnage en eux est Gwydion, un magicien de Gwynedd. Parmi ses exploits, il se déguise en poète de Glamorgan (dans le sud du Pays de Galles) et trompe ainsi une sorcière de Gwynedd, qui est dupe en l'accueillant en tant que conteur et artiste. De la même manière, il avait déjà trompé un prince de Dyfed (ou du sud-ouest du Pays de Galles).*

Bien que pure légende, les épisodes ont un parallèle semi-historique chez les bardes qui ont involontairement produit un conflit entre Deheubarth (sud du Pays de Galles) et Glamorgan. Selon

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l'antiquaire Rice Merrick (mort en 1587), la querelle était le résultat de la passion royale, comme à Troie. Son Hélène était l'épouse d'Iestyn (mort en 1100 ?), seigneur de Glamorgan ; son Paris était Rhys (mort en 1093), prince de Deheubarth. Rhys est devenu obsédé par la femme d'Iestyn après avoir entendu des poètes la décrire. Pourtant, elle était fidèle à son mari comme Hélène ne l'était pas à Ménélas. Déçu par son désir, Rhys a commencé à menacer son voisin. D'où un antagonisme entre Dyfed et Glamorgan qui a conduit au désastre pour les deux. Les « bardes de Glamorgan » dans ces deux récits sont le thème de cet article, avec trois conclusions principales : (a) Les sources ne témoignent ni du XIe siècle ni de l'excellence particulière des vers de Glamorgan ; (b) La représentation de Glamorgan dans les quatre branches est cohérente avec la paternité d'un membre de la maison dirigeante de Gwynedd qui (par mariage) vivait à Dyfed; (c) il n'y a, en revanche, aucun lien entre les contes et le monastère celtique de Clynnog (dans l'ouest de Gwynedd), malgré les affirmations de certains.

Mots clés : *Pays de Galles; Quatre Branches du Mabinogi ; bardes gallois; Gwynedd ; Glamorgan ; tradition celtique.*

1. Introduction

So much may stand as an abstract of the approach and conclusions of this paper. But one may say a little more before we begin the subject proper. It could be maintained that the incident of Gwydion as feigned poet of the South is a minor one. Does it really merit full-length discussion? The answer is that, in itself, the episode is indeed of slight importance. Glamorgan's early literary history is poorly recorded; we find virtually no poetry from the region until the fourteenth century; there is no reason to think that its twelfth-century bards were better or worse than those in the rest of Wales.

Yet a greater issue is involved. It is the troublesome one of when and by whom the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* were written. Anybody familiar with Celtic Studies from the late 1990s will know this as a contested matter. It has been proposed in books and papers listed below that internal evidence shows the tales as compositions by a woman; it can be argued further that she was Gwenllian (d. 1136), daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan (d. 1137), ruler of Gwynedd, and wife to Gruffydd ap Rhys (d. 1137), prince of Dyfed. Her position as a Gwynedd princess married to a Dyfed prince accounts for the knowledge shown in the stories of Gwynedd and Dyfed topography alike. It accounts too for an emphasis (also unique) on the aggrandizement of both Gwynedd and Dyfed. It tallies as well with the author's familiarity, not only with the luxuries and ceremony of court life, but with political procedure.

Thos includes negotiation with truculent nobles (in the first branch, where the ruler Pwyll comes to terms with Dyfed magnates who hint at deposing him); settling disputes with an insulted guest (the King of Ireland, in the second branch); or reaching favourable terms with an enemy whose country one has invaded (the King of Ireland, later in the second branch). With them is yet another element; a strange interest in motherhood and child-raising, and heroines (Rhiannon, Teyrnon's wife, Branwen) who in various ways get the better of their menfolk.

Reaction to arguments for these classic stories as the work of a woman, and specifically of a princess from twelfth-century Gwynedd, has been varied. But nobody (it seems) has disproved it, even though that could be done easily. If, for example, it could be demonstrated that the narratives postdate 1136 (when Gwenllian was executed by the Normans) or before 1120 (when she attained her majority), the case would, naturally, collapse.

In this context, Glamorgan bards have significance. If the *Four Branches* were the work of a twelfth-century Gwynedd princess, Gwydion's posing as a Glamorgan man will be 'corroborative detail' that accords with that hypothesis. In contrast are supposed links between the narratives and the Celtic monastery of Clynnog, near Caernarfon, Gwynedd. It is attempts to relate them which make (in Pooh-Bah's phrase from *The Mikado*) a 'bald and unconvincing narrative'. Having made that clear, we return to versifiers of Glamorgan.

2. Early Traditions of Glamorgan Bards

Here are the relevant passages. First, Rice Merrick. In the time of William Rufus (1087-1100), the Prince of Deheubarth (or 'Carmarthin, Penbroch, and Cardigan Shyres') was 'Rice vap Tewder'; 'Jestin vap Gurga' was his neighbour as Lord of Glamorgan. Between them came 'the venemous Serpent of Malice or Dissension' owing to 'the unsatiable & inordinate desire of Rice ap Tewdwr, to Justin's Wife' (who is elsewhere called 'Nest'). It happened when Rhys's court poets visited Iestyn in Glamorgan. On their return they told Rhys about Iestyn's wife, praised 'as well for her bewtie as for her good qualities' (leading to unfortunate results). Rhys was a 'lusty prince' and 'soone kindled with Venus darte'; he quickly arranged a meeting at Neath, on the border of their realms. Finding that the lady passed all expectation, Rhys (after a banquet) made his desires known to her. She informed her husband; the Glamorgan party left secretly by night; Rhys made this out as an insult; relations soured. Rice Merrick, linking the tale (preserved 'from one generation to another' in Deheubarth and Glamorgan alike) to Deheubarth's suzerainty over Glamorgan, saw the Norman conquest of Glamorgan in the 1090s as a result.

Now for the *Mabinogi* tale of Math, son of Mathonwy, and Gwydion's deceptions of a Dyfed prince and Gwynedd sorceress. Pryderi of Dyfed possessed magic swine. In order to steal them, Gwydion and his party arrived at Pryderi's court of Rhuddlan Teifi (near the present-day Lampeter). 'In the guise of bards they came in, and they were received joyfully, and Gwydion was placed beside Pryderi that night.' Gwydion entertained the court with a tale; all went well; he obtained the otherworld swine through a ruse; when it was discovered, he and his men (and the pigs) were already on their way to Gwynedd. Back home, Gwydion got the better of Aranrod, female magician. Arriving in disguise at her stronghold, he told the porter that he was a Glamorgan bard with his retinue, and was warmly received. At dinner, Gwydion made himself popular with 'tales and stories'; everyone then retired; but at dawn Gwydion rose and performed supernatural rites that broke Aranrod's power.

3. Discussion of the Passages 1911-1971

How have these colourful narratives been understood? Sir John Lloyd in 1911 poured cold water on the first. Despite the 'laborious particularity' of accounts by Humphrey Llwyd (1527-68) and others, almost nothing is known of 'Iestyn's defeat and overthrow' (how the Normans conquered Glamorgan will thus always be obscure). As for the *Mabinogi* passages, with information on professional poets and traditions of magic, there are equivalents for the latter in a Book of Taliesin poem called 'Ceridwen's Chair' (where Gwydion figures with Pryderi and Aranrod). Ceridwen (a witch) speaks in obscure verses on how Gwydion outwitted Pryderi (with 'sham horses' made out of fungus) and

Aranrod (with a beautiful woman made out of flowers). The manuscript is of the fourteenth century, the poem (as we shall see) far older.

Full analysis of the tale of Iestyn and Rhys, adding significant detail, came in 1948. Rice Merrick found one version in 'Records of the auncient Abbey of Neth' (so that the story must be old). It was in Neath Abbey's 'Register' or cartulary, in modern times known from later copies only. According to a variant account, the bards were not those of Rhys but came from Glamorgan. They visited Rhys and (seeing his charmless spouse) remarked tactlessly on how it was a pity that he had not married Nest, wife to Iestyn of Glamorgan. That was how the trouble started. An allusion to Iestyn and Rhys by Ieuan Rudd (minor poet of the later fifteenth century) is further proof that the legend predated the Elizabethans.[6] One notes how sources differ on whether the bards were from Glamorgan or West Wales. As a Glamorgan patriot, Rice Merrick in his *A Booke of Glamorganshires Antiquities* puts blame for the havoc on Rhys's court poets. In that version, Glamorgan men and women emerge without a stain.

Further comment includes that of Kenneth Jackson on how Gwydion outwitted Pryderi by giving him magnificent steeds and greyhounds and shields, all of them conjured out of toadstools and vanishing the next day. The theme is an 'international popular tale' (familiar from many other texts).[7] Central here, however, is Ceri Lewis's chapter on Glamorgan's literature. He echoed G. J. Williams in 1948, but saw parallels between Iestyn's poets (in the variant tradition) and Gwydion the Glamorgan bard. He said this. Gwydion and his accomplice Lleu (having 'changed their semblance') gain entrance to Aranrhod's fortress by posing as Glamorgan literati with their servants.

Ceri Lewis regarded their cordial reception as perhaps evidence for 'the high esteem' in which such poets were held beyond Glamorgan. He went further by taking the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* as the work of 'a man from Dyfed' active 'at the beginning of the second half of the eleventh century'; on that (exceedingly flimsy) premise, he believed that Glamorgan had 'some renown' for its bards 'even before the period of the Norman incursions' (at the end of the eleventh century). That he related to stories of Iestyn and Rhys, with poets of one or the other visiting the neighbouring ruler, their indiscreet remarks upon a woman's beauty bringing about Glamorgan's ruin. If there is a grain of truth in them, it may offer 'a genuine insight into the itinerant activities of the professional bards in the pre-Norman era' (that is, before the 1090s).

It is the purpose of this paper to show that, the *Four Branches* not predating the 1120s, much of this is baseless. The real implications of Gwydion, bard of Glamorgan, are other. Despite that, woolly thinking on the subject continues. Gwydion deceives many now, just as he deceived Pryderi and Aranrhod.

4. Discussion 1978-2020

Celtic Studies being slow to change; it was a generation before any of the above was challenged. Early allusions to Gwydion 'who made by enchantment a woman from flowers' after creating horses and saddles to bring 'swine from the south' were assembled (together with those to his victims, Pryderi and Aranrod). His visit to Aranrod's court is also cited for its 'classic reference to storytelling' as a duty of professional poets. On the date of the *Four Branches*, opinions were as late as 1996 cited for anything between about 1060 and 1250.[11] Dr Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan yet spoke of them as reaching 'their present

written form between 1050 and 1120' (which cannot be true).

In 1997 came new arguments, putting the *Four Branches* after 1120 and before 1136.[13] As evidence for Glamorgan bards before 'the period of the Norman incursions' the narratives are hence worthless. They cast light on Henry I's last years, not Rhys and Iestyn in the 1090s.

In 1997, then, traditions of Glamorgan in about 1090 became enmeshed with debate on when the *Four Branches* were composed. The case for the late 1120s (or early 1130s) seems incontrovertible. Opposition continues all the same. One of the first replies has (despite much detail) been little noticed, no doubt because its author offered no specific date for the *Four Branches* (and even proclaimed herself unable to decide 'the author's gender').[14] Also inconclusive was a study on the tale of Math, with reference to Gwydion.[15]

More important (while one may reject its last part) is analysis of the cycle's politics, although it says almost nothing on Glamorgan. But it shows a commend of facts, unlike a vague account of governance in the story of Math, containing the assertion that reference (in a previous branch) to 'the crown of London' puts 'quite firmly in a legendary past' a ruler mentioned in the text.[17] This is a half-truth. No king was crowned at London before 1066. The stories will reflect politics in the late eleventh century or (rather) early twelfth, before the anarchy of Stephen's reign (1135-54), to which they make no allusion. As for Gwydion at Pryderi's court, there came an original comment. His table-talk is interpreted as 'conversations and anecdates' (and not 'versions of our tales'). That goes too far. Gwydion had a repertoire of narratives, making him (at first) a desirable guest.

We note in passing an interesting paper on Iestyn as issuing his own coinage. Glamorgan's royal mint (its site once even marked on maps) is (of course) mythical, the result of eighteenth-century literary forgeries. But their debunking contains useful information on him. Similar debunking appears in a paper on the *Four Branches* and Celtic paganism.[20] Also published at this time was a note on Meilyr of Pendar, a genuine Glamorgan poet (and hermit), active in the later twelfth century. No text can be identified as his, but his work was surely religious, like poems (on penance, praise of Creation, the Virgin and Child, miracles of the saints) in the Book of Taliesin and elsewhere.[21] As a bard, Meilyr differed from those at the courts of Rhys or Iestyn or Pryderi, who took love or marvels or heroic deeds as their subjects, Gwydion being proof of it.

Book of Taliesin verses attributed to Ceridwen, telling how Gwydion 'conjured up a woman from flowers' and so on, now have a proper edition, if with no clear indication of their date (although 'eleventh-century' may not be far out).[23] As for the *Four Branches*, they are discussed by Simon Rodway, who concludes that on 'questions of authorship, location, and date' any 'incontestable answers are likely to prove elusive' (which, if true, would mean saying goodbye to any form of reasoned discourse whatsoever).[24]

In stark contrast is another writer, affirming that these narratives are no older than the 1120s. In the third branch Pryderi renders homage at Oxford to Caswallon, ruler of Britain. Caswallon must represent Henry I, another usurper and formidable ruler of the island, who began holding court at Woodstock (near Oxford) in the 1120s. Nor can the tales postdate 1138 or so, when Geoffrey of Monmouth published his great pseudo-history of Britain. His sensational account of Arthur was at once famous, even in Wales. Yet the *Four Branches* show not the slightest influence of it. That puts them in the later 1120s or slightly after.

For other views we turn to Nikolai Tolstoy and special features of these texts: Glamorgan's conquest by Pryderi of Dyfed; Gwydion's pretence of coming from Glamorgan; the (dubious) hypothesis of their composition at 'Clas Beuno' (=Clynnog Fawr), a Celtic monastery in Gwynedd; and 'stipulations of the Welsh laws' on poets as professional story-tellers.[26] Count Tolstoy prompts thought.

The writer of the tales presents Glamorgan as alien territory which came under Dyfed's political control. Pryderi's troops occupy Glamorgan; a wizard assumes Glamorgan identity when betraying Aranrod. These incidents show Glamorgan as somewhat unfamiliar to the author, and best when under Dyfed's control. They support a case for the *Four Branches* as written by a native of Gwynedd who resided in Dyfed. (They do not imply that Glamorgan bards had special distinction.) To outwit Aranrod, Gwydion needed a disguise. A Dyfed one would insult the author's Dyfed readers. Hence the convenience of Glamorgan, beyond Dyfed. The author could speak of it freely, as with Lower Gwent (to the east of it), the domain of Teyrnon, a man described in the *Mabinogi*'s first branch as vassal to Pryderi's father.

In a survey of early Celtic astrology is discussion of Gwydion, taken as a sage resembling King Solomon. It is unpersuasive. Over-influenced by his wives, Solomon had failings, but not those of Gwydion. (For one thing, nobody ever accused Solomon of stealing pigs.) The comment is not thought out. Elsewhere is analysis of political or diplomatic negotiation and decision-making in the *Four Branches*. Their author, clearly versed in such affairs, would be no monk or clerk, but a member of a ruling class familiar with Gwynedd and Dyfed alike. That is fatal for assertions by Professor Sims-Williams on how the provenance of the four stories 'remains uncertain'; his proposal of 'input into the material' from the Gwynedd monastery of Clynnog Fawr (a place never mentioned in the texts) is likewise without basis. Further analysis of literary geography underlines the point. In contrast again is a study of the *Four Branches* by a Sovietologist at Birmingham University, a book useful in testing beliefs on the *Four Branches*, and on reasoned discourse as a whole. A further account relates the vocabulary of the stories to that of the royal house of Gwynedd.

Patrick Sims-Williams's views on the Fourth Branch and the clerics of Clynnog are cited approvingly by Professor Charles-Edwards. He sees in them 'a strong argument for associating the Fourth Branch' with the religious community of Clynnog Fawr (he also comments on Gwydion as Glamorgan poet and story-teller). Professor Charles-Edwards does not say what that 'strong argument' is. One wonders at its nature. A further will-o'-the-wisp is his opinion on Gwynedd (not Dyfed) as the author's 'home' (failing to account for the positive way in which the writer portrays Gwynedd and Dyfed alike). Professor Charles-Edwards's account of the tales lacks all coherence.

A comment on the 'informative precision' of the *Four Branches* as concerns real places in Wales, unlike the dream-like landscapes of thirteenth-century Welsh Arthurian romances (of Geraint, Peredur, Owain), is significant. It offers clues on the author, who was expert on politics, exalted Gwynedd and Dyfed, but thought little of Glamorgan. Topography is again examined by a retired geologist, whose work deserves attention, not least for its diagrams and maps. Their professionalism makes most accounts of place in the *Four Branches* look amateurish. Its emphasis is, however, on microtopography. Much

is said on courts and highways. There is less on larger entities (Gwynedd, Dyfed, Ireland, England) as evidence for composition in the twelfth century. Implications for that appear elsewhere.

In recent years the rate of publication has quickened. Readers may compare approaches in three articles (two of them from Poland). The first avoids specifics. In a footnote towards the close, its author even maintains that 'the exact date of composition for the text is not known' (although it was 'almost certainly' before 1282). The second author discusses poems composed and recited by Gwydion towards the end of the tale, so that in him the 'traditional learning' of the Welsh is found with 'the magical power to transform, whether for good or for ill' and 'divine creative power'. The last cites detail, providing evidence to identify the author and put the stories to within a few years of 1128.[3]

Five books of varying kinds bring this survey to a close. In a monograph on the tales and Welsh law, Robin Chapman Stacey has material on Gwynedd and Dyfed, but almost nothing on what representations of the two (in war and peace) reveal on the narrator. There is a (somewhat detached) mention of supposed links with Celtic monks at Clynnog.[40] In a new translation of the Book of Taliesin poem are allusions to Gwydion (who 'conjured a woman from flowers' and 'stole the swine of the South'). Patrick Sims-Williams's notion of 'the religious foundation at Clynnog Fawr in Arfon' as where the *Four Branches* originated is cited briefly (amd in neutral terms). Diana Luft asserts that when and where the eleven *Mabinogion* tales were written 'remain the subject of debate'; she is yet sure that 'we do not know who wrote them' (but without saying why).[43] Again referring to Patrick Sims-Williams, Ben Guy notes Clynnog's connections in the thirteenth century with a dynasty of Welsh lawyers (including 'at least two professional poets').[44] But this is no evidence for the *Four Branches* as composed at Clynnog. (Nor does Dr Guy claim that.) Less cautious is Barry Lewis, who writes of Wales's native monasteries as 'creators and preservers of Welsh literature' and who claims (without explanation) that there is an 'important' case for 'attributing particular texts' to them, especially as concerns the *Four Branches* and Clynnog Fawr.[45] Not so. The *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* have nothing to do with the monks of Clynnog. In a few years this will be seen as obvious. Some will be baffled that anyone took the idea seriously.

5. Conclusion

It is time to sum up. Here are three conclusions. One notices first how various early views have sunk without trace, especially Ceri Lewis's suggestion of 1971 that Gwydion 'of Glamorgan' in the tale of Math offers 'a genuine insight into the itinerant activities of the professional bards' in the years about 1060. He does no such thing. Nobody now sees the *Four Branches* as pre-Norman compositions. If they were, it would be surprising that they contain French loanwords (*cordwal* 'cordwain, fine Spanish leather'; *pali* 'brocaded silk'; *swmer* 'pack, baggage'); which (we may add) together suggest the luxuries of a court, not the austerities of a cloister. Time being needed for borrowings from French to enter Welsh, they put the *Four Branches* some decades after 1066, and surely later than Rhys (d. 1093) of Deheubarth and Iestyn (d. 1100?) of Glamorgan. Nor is there a particular link between them and Glamorgan bards in the variant form of Rice Merrick's anecdote.

The story of Iestyn and Rhys is a romantic folktale. It is *cherchez la femme*, Welsh style. There is no 'grain of truth' in its account of poets and the Lady Nest and Rhys's

passion for her.

Second is the place of Glamorgan in the author's mentality. The *Four Branches* show minute familiarity with North and West Wales alike. Their creator attributes political expansion or suceess to both regions. When there is war between them (in the tale of Math considered here), there is even an expression of sympathy for Pryderi's troops, defeated after invading Gwynedd in pursuit of Gwydion and the swine. Brynley Roberts (cited above) has noted such loyalty to two parts of Wales as not just extraordinary. It is unique. Yet there is a simple explanation for it: that the author (who can be named), brought up in the Gwynedd royal family, married into the royal house of Dyfed. Hence a dual partisanship or support for two Welsh realms.

Consistent with it is the place of Glamorgan. Gwydion assumes the identity of a Glamorgan bard not because poets there were good ones (although doubtless as good as those of Gwent or Powys or Anglesey), but because Glamorgan was distant from Aranrod's palace (near Caernarfon). Strangers came to her door, claiming to be from far away. Their disguise allayed suspicion. Elsewhere in the narratives Glamorgan appears as territory conquered by Dyfed. The writer believed that the South should be dominated by Dyfed (Glamorgan ending up as an appendage to it), and the North by Gwynedd. Such a two-fold political bias has (as observed above) no parallel whatsoever in the entire corpus of Welsh literature.

The third conclusion is this. Literary works pass through time, receiving shifting interpretations. Valid criticism is remembered. The rest is forgotten. Since the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* came to scholarly attention under the young Queen Victoria, fashions have come and gone. One instance is an origin for the tales in pagan myth, set out fully by the gifted littérateur W. J. Gruffydd (1881-1954), whose theories were in 1961 effectively demolished by Kenneth Jackson (in his book cited above).

Another example is Ceri Lewis's dating the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* to 'the beginning of the second half of the eleventh century'; for him, Gwydion's subterfuge implied that Glamorgan bards had 'some renown' even 'before the period of the Norman incursions' (perhaps offering 'a genuine insight into the itinerant activities of the professional bards in the pre-Norman era'). This essay will fail if it does not explode such views. It brings us to a third instance, the suggestions of Professor Sims-Williams on (in his own words) 'input into the material' of the tales from the hermits of Clynnog Fawr.

The poet and scholar A. E. Housman remarked long ago that the house of illusion is cheap to build, but draughty to live in. Clynnog, on the Lleyn Peninsula of Gwynedd, is on an exposed and treeless site, with little protection against ocean gales. It provides an analogy. Professor Sims-Williams's belief in Clynnog's influence on the *Four Branches* also lets in draughts. The case for it is not 'very strong'; it is thinner than a wisp of air. Clynnog never figures in the tales; nor does its founder, St Beuno, who is to North Wales what St David is the South. No other Welsh Christian sites are mentioned in them; they contain no reference to their saints or lands or legal rights (unlike Welsh hagiography).

The *Four Branches* show no trace of ecclesiastical Latin learning; there are no allusions to Virgil or Cicero or Church Fathers or even (most remarkably) the Bible. The narrator's ambit is secular. It is one of hunting, feasting, government, life at court, travel, jewels, clothes, horses, hounds, fine shoes, fabrics, shields, saddles. Further aspects are more surprising still. One is an interest in child-raising and motherhood and (in the present

tale of Math) wet-nursing. Another (in the first branch) concerns a married couple in bed. They make love, and we learn of the wife's afterthoughts on that. If (as we are told) the tales came from a circle of male religious, they would be strange ones. They had a most unclerical interest in jewels and expensive clothes and shoes, to say nothing of a more bizarre one in babies and breast-feeding and a woman's thoughts after her husband makes love to her. If, however, their author were a married lady (and mother) of royal status, such passages are no surprise.

Consideration of Glamorgan bards, both in the twelfth-century story of Math and the sixteenth-century anecdote of Rice Merrick, has implications expected and unexpected. For the *Mabinogi*, it underlines the author's political foregrounding of Gwynedd and Dyfed, with Glamorgan appearing as marginal and impotent. It also discredits any connection with the hermits of Clynnog. As for Rice Merrick, he shows how a folktale on love and war has (surely) been imposed on Glamorgan's eleventh-century history. Despite that, the *Four Branches* and Rice Merrick's *Booke* have things in common. Both indicate the status of poets in Welsh society. These men roamed the country; they had retainers; they were welcomed by princes; at feasts, they occupied places of honour; they entertained, informed, influenced. They took pride in their privileged and well-paid calling. All this is described (with emphasis on political poetry) in a recent survey.[46] As evidence for their rank and functions, the itinerant poets in the *Four Branches* and *A Booke of Glamorganshires Antiquities* are thus of permanent interest.

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