

SYNCHRONIC ANALYSIS II: THE DYNASTIC AND SOCIAL AGENDA OF THE FIRST BRANCH

The Tribal Politics of the First Branch

Before we bring this chapter to a close, we must consider how the First Branch would have cohered with the wider, exoteric concerns of the audience community involved. These include what we would consider to be a diverse range of issues, relating to twelfth-century medieval Welsh dynastic-political machinations as well as the tribal-historic background we explored in the introduction to this chapter. As has already been suggested, such areas of interest would not have been distinct in the medieval mind, either from one another or from the magical narrative analysed in the preceding sections. The Four Branches, in short, would have been understood by its original audiences as charting a sequence of definatory actions which, although enacted in a distant mythological past, continued to reverberate in the medieval present. The central contemporary resonance of the First Branch evidently lay in the geopolitical tensions between what we have referred to as ‘the Royal Tribe’ on one hand, and the indigenous noble houses of ‘the Ancient South’ on the other. There is also the intra-dynastic question of the relationship between the northern and southern branches of the Royal Tribe (i.e. the Houses of Aberffraw and Dinefwr). This internecine dimension will be considered in more detail in the chapters that follow. What concerns us here, in the context of the First Branch, is the wider *intertribal* tension between the Royal Tribe as a whole and the Ancient South.

Throughout early post-Roman centuries, as we have seen, these two Welsh cultures remained more or less confined to their own spheres. But in the wake of the geopolitical disturbances occasioned by the arrival of the Vikings from the early ninth century, a number of the old indigenous lines seem to have come to an end. It was under these conditions that the Royal Tribe had begun to emerge as a pan-Welsh hegemonic force. They had intermarried with the native dynasties of Ceredigion and Powys, and by the mid-ninth century they were expanding as far as the southern coastlands of Ystrad Twyi. This penetration into South-West Wales was consolidated by a dynastic union in the early-tenth century: between Hywel Dda (Rhodri Mawr’s grandson) and the daughter of the House of Dyfed, Elen daughter of Llywarch ap Hyfaidd. As we have already suggested, this created an enduring link between the Royal Tribe and the Ancient South that seems to have been remembered for generations to come. The thesis of this chapter has been that the archetypal figures of Pwyll and Rhiannon were being represented as the mythological prefigurations of this significant tenth-century dynastic alliance.

Hywel Dda is to be found at the heart of a complex of relationships between the southern and northern segments of the Royal Tribe as well as between the Ancient South and the Royal Tribe as a whole. Given his correspondence to this key dynastic figure, it is interesting to observe the way in which Pwyll is represented in the First Branch. As we will see in the analysis of the other three Branches, the main characters in the Mabinogi often can be matched typologically with nodal dynastic figures of this kind. When we begin to consider this typological matrix in its totality, some revealing patterns begin to emerge.

The key element in the representation of Pwyll that we will consider at this stage is his incomplete integration into the cultural sphere of the Ancient South/Indigenous Underworld. The complex and frequently uneasy relationships between Pwyll and his ‘foster-brothers’, as well as strongly localised figures such as Pendaran Dyfed should be seen in this light. Both Pendaran Dyfed and the hostile foster-brothers seem to have been comparable to native elements at the tenth century Demetian court whose primary loyalty would have been to the old indigenous line – and who might therefore have been ambivalent towards Hywel Dda with his northern connections. The First Branch as a whole might be seen as an attempt to counterbalance this acknowledged cultural rift through a series of symbolic magical moves, linking this mythical prototype of Hywel Dda with the fetishes of sovereignty in the Ancient South. The inheritance of the mantle of *Pen Annwfn*, as well as the marriage to the tutelary figure of Rhiannon, both might be seen as hegemonic myths of this kind – designed to bolster and legitimise the authority of Hywel Dda and his descendants within this southern sphere. Overlaying these older typological equations, which we may date back the mid-eleventh century, if not to the time of Hywel Dda himself,⁴⁴³ we find evidence of more recent mythogenic activity. This can be related to specific events closer to the time-frame we have been considering for the composition of the Mabinogi in its final form.

By the mid-twelfth century, native power was beginning to reassert itself in the borders of South-East Wales, which had previously been dominated by marcher lords such as William Fitzosbern and Robert Fitzhamo (pp. 45-46). The leaders of this native resurgence were the indigenous ruling families of Gwent and Glywyssing. Among the Welsh-speaking enclaves of Glamorgan, Afan, Meisgyn and Glynrhondda it was the descendants of *Iestyn ap Gwrgant*, the last king of Glamorgan, that were leading the native resistance (the right-hand branch on family tree on p. 39 above). The descendants of *Caradog ap Gruffydd* (Iestyn’s third cousin, who had died at Mynydd Carn in 1081), were styling themselves as ‘Lords of Caerleon’ or rulers of the ‘House of Gwynllwg’. As the power of the Marchers began to wane from the 1160s onwards, it was men such as these – rather than any representatives of the Royal Tribe – that were emerging as the likely successors of the Marcher lords in the southern and eastern borderlands of Wales.

There is no doubt this would have been troubling for the House of Dinefwr, whose goal it would have been to continue the work of their tenth- and eleventh-century predecessors and extend their sphere of influence across the entirety of the South. Just as Gruffydd ap Llywelyn (see p. 43-44 above) had struggled with Gruffydd ap Rhydderch of Gwent in the eleventh century, so too did Lord Rhys find himself in conflict with this Rhydderch’s great-grandson (Iorwerth o Wynllyg) more than a hundred years later. This was an old problem for the Royal Tribe of Wales and one that undoubtedly

443 Hywel’s reign was evidently something of a cultural golden age in South Wales, during which time documents like Harlien 3859 (containing the *Annales Cambriae*, along some of the earliest generalogies of the royal houses of Wales) were evidently produced in the libraries and scriptoria of St. David’s. The systematisation of British Celtic legal custom – still known as *The Laws of Hywel Dda* – is traditionally traced back to the reign of this king. All of this represents a likely context for the early development of the tribal-historic traditions underlying Pwyll I and II, although (in terms of geo-political motivation) the case can also be made for the reigns of eleventh century kings like Llywelyn ap Seissyl and his son Gruffydd, both of whom expended considerable energy attempting to consolidate their power in the South.

required a cultural or diplomatic solution, as much as one involving the force of arms. There are signs that, just as earlier generations had evidently invoked the composite figure of *Pwyll Pendevic/Pwyll Pen Annwfn* to insinuate mythological legitimacy of their presence in the kingdom of Dyfed, so Lord Rhys ap Gruffydd of the House of Dinfwr seems to have made use of the local southern hero, Pryderi son of Pwyll (perhaps formally son of Pendaran Dyfed), in order to justify his own hegemonic ambitions.

One significant unifying force in South Wales in the mid-twelfth century was the Cistercian monastic network, which had been enthusiastically sponsored by the native princes from the 1130s onwards. Chief among its patrons was Lord Rhys himself, whose support had been instrumental in the establishment of Strata Florida in 1165. This was to become one of enduring centres of Welsh religious and cultural life and may have even housed the scriptorium in which the White Book of Rhydderch was originally produced (at the behest of Lord Rhys's descendant Rhydderch ap Ieuan). More importantly for our present purposes, we can see an interesting correlation between the local landscape lore of the first three Branches and the territorial holdings of Strata Florida and its daughter houses. As considered at the end of the previous chapter (p. 131), there are good reasons for supposing that the synthesis of lore underlying the Four Branches might be connected in some way with this particular monastic network.

One of the daughter houses of Strata Florida was Llantarnam in Gwent-Ys-Coed, founded in 1179. The patron of this foundation was a certain Hywel ap Iorwerth, Lord of Caerleon, of the indigenous House of Gwynllyg. The name of the valley in which Llantarnam was founded, *Nant Teyrnion*, suggests that residual narrative lore pertaining to this old pagan figure might well have been current in the neighbourhood of this monastery along with stories of his son, the aforementioned Maponus-doublet 'Gwri Golden-Hair' (*Gwri Eur Gwallt*).⁴⁴⁴ A connection would at some stage have been established between this tradition and the stories accumulating around the names of Pwyll and Pryderi in the Teifi valley area (which had perhaps even been gathered by bardic or monastic *cyfarwyddiad* based at Whitland or Strata Florida). The resultant synthesis of these two strands of the old legend of Maponus seems to have formed the core of the First Branch (and the Mabinogi as a whole) as we have it today.

Representing Teyrnion as the client-vassal of Pryderi (c.f. p. 226, n. 420) not only mirrored the hierarchy of the Strata Florida and its daughter houses; it also dovetailed conveniently with the political aspirations of Lord Rhys and the House of Dinefwr. Through a number of carefully chosen marital alliances between members of his immediate family and the old indigenous royal lines, Rhys had been positioning himself at the centre of a powerful geopolitical network which extended deep into the borderlands of southern and eastern Wales. By the early 1170s, the leading families of Maelynydd, Elfael, Gwrtheyrion, Glamorgan, Senghenydd and Caerleon were all related to him by birth or by marriage.⁴⁴⁵ In 1172, no doubt as a result of this advantageous dynastic position, Rhys was

444 Gruffydd (1953) maintains that Gwri would have been the actual (rather than adopted) son of Teyrnion in the 'original' tradition. This suggestion has been broadly accepted by a number of more recent scholars (e.g. Eric Hamp, 1999).

445 J. Davies (1990) p.127

able to claim the title ‘Lord Proprietor of the whole of South Wales’; and exert substantial power over these southeastern chieftains. This he did on behalf of Henry II, whom he now regarded as his overlord (much as Pryderi served the London-based High Kings Bendigeidfrân and Caswallawn in the Second and Third Branches). The Mabinogi provided tribal-historic precedence for such arrangements, and thereby legitimised the status quo.

The one concession, perhaps, to the more obdurate indigenous elements in the South might be seen in the person of *Gwawl fab Clud*, who represented (among other things) a clear caricature of the northern oppressor (p. 204, n. 355). His name literally means ‘Wall son of Wealth’, and he would seem to have specific geographical associations with the Old North, the Hadrian’s Wall area and the Solway Firth (*Clud* < O. Irish *cleodna* ‘Wave’, which gives its name to the River *Clyde*). While the humiliation of Gwawl in the ‘Badger-in-the-Bag’ incident arguably recalls the humiliation of Gerald of Windsor (p. 206, n. 363), the careful positioning of Pwyll as the enemy of this definitively northern character may well have been calculated to appeal to native southern sentiments on a more visceral, tribal level.

By the same token, the settlement of Gwawl’s hostages in the Dyfed area might have been taken by some to be a reference to the Flemish or Marcher enclaves. But for some southern audiences this situation was also reminiscent of the abiding presence of the Royal Tribe within what they would still have seen as their ancestral territories. The Badger-in-the-Bag incident may have recalled the humiliation (and subsequent revenge) of Gerald of Windsor (see n. 362, p. 206), but it could equally have been applied to an earlier incident which followed a similar pattern: in which Gruffydd ap Llywelyn’s household were treacherously dispatched by the *uchelwyr* of Ystrad Twyi in 1047.⁴⁴⁶ It was the identification of these perennial patterns, and the geo-cultural faultlines they served to accentuate, which was the essence of the art of tribal history.

The Perfidy of the Southern Uchelwyr

This brings us to the interpersonal, sociopolitical aspects of the First Branch of the Mabinogi. The most obvious of these – hinted at already by the troubled relationship between Pwyll and his ‘foster-brothers’ – is the whole issue of the balance of power between the king and the local warrior-aristocracy. This body of nobles or *uchelwyr* is very rarely given much in the way of individual identity, but throughout the Four Branches, in various different contexts its influence *as a group* is frequently felt. This influence is by no means always positive and it was clearly a source of deep concern to the author of the Mabinogi how vulnerable the judgement of the king might have been to pressure from this aggressively vocal section of the court community.

As we have already seen, the *uchelwyr* or noblemen of the South were notorious for their ungovernability even in the late-twelfth century (see p. 150 above). The First Branch does little to challenge this regional stereotype, with Pwyll himself being subject to ‘the murmuring of nobles’ on more than one occasion. The First Branch represents this as an undercurrent of hostility, which expresses itself with increasing distinctness. This is first apparent at the end of Pwyll I when the Demetian prince is told bluntly on his return from Annwn that he must live up to the quality of leadership they had experienced under Arawn (p. 186). While Andrew Welsh is probably correct to

446 ByT 1045=1047

suggest that the whole doubling sequence with Arawn signifies (on one level) Pwyll's integration of a better aspect of himself,⁴⁴⁷ the nature of these demands does not suggest that the Demetian king had the full and unconditional respect of his peers.

Pwyll II opens on a similar note. The hero is told by one of his courtiers that 'a high-born man' sitting on the mound at Arberth would experience 'one of two things: either his receiving blows or witnessing a marvel (*ryvedawt*)'. As medieval audiences would have understood, there was more to this double-edged comment than an innocent relaying of topographical lore. This was, as we have already suggested, a implicit challenge to his kingship on a magical level, backed up with the threat of regicidal violence. In keeping with his blithe and trusting character (about which we have more to say below) Pwyll cheerfully asserts that he has 'no need to fear blows in a company such as this' but would be happy to see a marvel. A marvel in the form of the horse-riding Rhiannon duly materialises. But medieval audiences, knowing what they did about insurgent propensities of the southern uchelwyr, would have doubtlessly felt the naive king Pwyll had been fortunate to return alive from Gorsedd Arberth.

The final suggestion of the hostile intentions of Pwyll's indigenous noblemen of the South comes at the beginning of Pwyll III, when questions start to be raised about Pwyll's lack of an heir. At this point Pwyll is told that '*...you will not last for ever, and though you wish to remain thus, we will not allow you*'. There are a number of ways in which this might be read (p. 220, nn. 397) but an undertow of hostility is unmistakably present, directed not only towards Pwyll himself but also towards his Otherworld bride Rhiannon. This would seem to reflect inter-tribal rivalries within the Ancient South,⁴⁴⁸ as well as the straight-forward resentment of the foster-brother king, with his implicit northern affiliations.

Interestingly enough, the closest comparison to the aggressive animus of this southern noble caste is to be found in the Second Branch (see p.301, n. 529), where the Irish king Matholwch singularly fails to exert effective leadership over the Gaelic nobility, a failure that leads him into a catastrophic war with the 'Island of the Mighty' (the name given to mainland Britain). It is likely that in the eyes of the Royal Tribe at least an ungovernable *uchelwyr* caste was a particular characteristic of the South, a trait which they would have perhaps believed was related to the presence of Gaelic elements in that area.⁴⁴⁹ During the eleventh century, at least three members of this northern-based Royal Tribe had fought pretender kings – backed by Irish mercenaries – over control of Ystrad Tywi and other parts of the South.⁴⁵⁰ These (possibly Gaelicised) *uchelwyr* were the main obstacle to the complete control of the South by the Royal Tribe, and the resentment towards them is especially apparent in the First Branch which (as we have seen) seems to be at least in part a vehicle for their ambitions in that area.

447 Welsh (1990) p.352

448 Medieval audiences, particularly those in the South, might have been aware of the complex tribal demography of Dyfed: which included various Irish and Romano-British cultural traditions, as well (one might assume) as more archaic native elements.

449 It should be remembered that part of their tribal mythology involved descent from the Romano-British *Cunedda* who, it was believed, drove 'the Irish' out of Wales, or at least those parts (i.e. the North) that remained under their control.

450 ByT 1020=1022 ; 1037-1042=1039-1044 ; 1045=1047

Pwyll: The Wise Fool

We cannot overlook what are clearly these xenophobic or (more accurately) ‘tribalist’ overtones of the discourse of this medieval text. It is likely that the author would have been inured to the notion that one group (i.e. the Royal Tribe) were inherently more suited to rulership while other demographics (i.e. the Irish, the indigenous people of the South) were by nature or inclination more given to insurgence and disorder. It would not be inaccurate to understand these sentiments as little more than the local prejudices of the particular court-community involved. One might expect to find similar variations on this theme throughout the medieval world. (Indeed, as we will see, much of the hegemonic discourse of the Mabinogi seems to have been influenced by and adapted from the colonial propaganda of the Angevin dynasty).

But the sensibilities of the author were not wholly confined to the unedifying prejudices of medieval tribal politics. There are moments throughout the Four Branches when this tribal consciousness is graciously transcended. A glint of sympathy appears in an unexpected quarter; the humanity of the Other is recognised and understood. It is perhaps for this reason that the Four Branches has the potential to reach modern readers in a way that many other medieval and ancient texts are unable. There is the glimmering emergence of a modern sensibility, amidst so much that is crude and atavistic. One might note in particular how uncomfortable the author seems to have been with some of the darker manifestations of the martial group-mind. This is apparent in his treatment of the Badger-in-the-Bag incident as well as his account of the framing of Rhiannon by the chamber maids. The brooding hostility of the Pwyll’s nobles and foster-brothers was undoubtedly seen as part of this phenomenon, a psycho-social tendency is presented as much as universal human-moral problem as the characteristic of any particular tribal/regional group.

Pwyll represents a counterpoint to the callous cynicism of the mob, and in this respect he embodies a very particular psychosocial ideal. Naivety is one way of describing the characteristic of Pwyll that is consistently stressed throughout the First Branch. But as the structure of the plot seems to emphasise, there are circumstances in which this absence of guile can produce some unexpected advantages. As we have seen, an undercurrent of hostility towards the king is made increasingly evident as the Branch progresses. The spectre of regicide at the hands of these noblemen of the South is regularly, if discreetly, evoked (e.g. p. 220 n. 399). Yet Pwyll remains oblivious to this danger and through a mixture of cheerful open-handedness and innocent good-nature, the Demetian king is able to side-step the malice of those that surround him and win the trust and friendship of powerful allies elsewhere. There is little doubt that, on level at least, this characteristic is being held up for ironic moral and social exemplum, from a humanist rather than a tribalist perspective.

The medieval world inhabited by the author and his audience had frequently come close to being irrevocably torn apart by political intrigue and dynastic in-fighting (a state of affairs portrayed with unflinching accuracy in the Second Branch). In such a violent social context, this quality of openness and unsullied integrity (closely related to the chivalric concept of *franchise*) must have exerted a powerful, if remote, appeal. While the subsequent fate of the son of Pwyll (in whom many of these attributes are also represented) shows the author's awareness of the limitations of this psychosocial mould, it would nonetheless appear to have been being advanced as an important aspect of the formula of good kingship. Pwyll represents, as it were, an incomplete part of the answer to the paradox of how a good man might thrive in an evil world.

Pwyll's interactions with the Indigenous Underworld are characterized by the same mixture of gaucheness and naivety that defined his relations with his Demetian peers. However, as we shall see, it is precisely this mixture of impetuosity and innocence through which Pwyll – more or less by accident – entangles himself with this otherworld reality in the first place, and then succeeds in navigating the complex magical by-laws of this upside-down world. The mystical union of Dyfed and Annwfn is explained in terms of these haphazard but highly fortunate adventures. The mytheme of the foolish hero would be expressed in its most extreme form in the figure of Perceval in the Continental Arthurian tradition (c.f. pp. 81 above). There is a persuasive case for identifying that this character-type as a specific innovation of the Welsh tradition, possibly originating in an earlier version of the First Branch itself. If this is indeed the case, it would seem that Pwyll may indeed have opened the door to the development of what would eventually become the Late Medieval figure of 'the Holy Fool', an archetype rich in spiritual significance.

The emergence of such a figure out of the ritual drama, tribal history and dynastic politics of the First Branch is an example of how sophisticated literary innovations can arise from these otherwise rather unpromising sources. In the chapters that follow, we will be keeping an eye out for similar contributions (both direct and indirect) by the Mabinogi into the subsequent reservoir of European culture. In many cases, as with this Pwyll-Perceval connection, it was through High Medieval Arthurian Romance that the Welsh narrative idiom was to enter the cultural mainstream. We will be considering this posthumous legacy of the Four Branches in more detail in the final chapter of this work. For now, it is enough to note that it was typically the *emotional core* of the Mabinogi that seemed to communicate itself most readily across cultural boundaries. While the 'Wise Fool' Pwyll had a specific esoteric and typological significance for the audiences of the Medieval Wales, it was the more visceral sense of bewilderment and existential ambiguity that pervaded his story that seems to have most inspired non-Welsh redactors of the Matter of Britain. This would lead, in due course, to the more familiar modes, including that which modern scholars have defined as the *gothic horror* or (in more general terms) as the fantastic. The place of the Mabinogi among the forerunners of these anti-rational post-industrial modes will be discussed on pp. 594 ff. below.