



Chapter 4

The Mabinogi of Manawydan

The wasteland myth and the enchantment of Dyfed

Introduction

Exile and Deliverance

The Mabinogi of Manawydan begins in the immediate aftermath of the Second Branch. The Seven Survivors are at the White Hill in London where they have recently buried the head of the warrior-king Bendigeidfrân. The atmosphere is subdued. The carnage and upheaval of the previous Branch still hangs in the air. Manawydan, gazing out on to the town of London, declares he is now a dispossessed man, a reference to the *coup d'état* towards the end of the Second Branch that saw the ousting of the House of Llŷr by Caswallon son of Beli Mawr. In the cold light of day, after the enchantment of the Wondrous Head and the Birds of Rhiannon has faded away, the full scale of the loss has become clear. The Seven Survivors stand at the dawn of a new era but what they initially face is political and emotional desolation.

The continuity from the Second Branch is direct and sequential. But what emerges in the story of Manawydan is a thematic and associative connection with the events of the Branch before that, i.e. the First Branch, the Mabinogi of Pwyll. This had already been anticipated by the presence of Pryderi among the Seven Survivors; but the connection is subsequently deepened by the marriage of Manawydan to Rhiannon and the other bonds of allegiance and friendship which, over the course of the Third Branch, bring the House of Llŷr into the sphere of the Ancient South (with its implicit connections to the Indigenous Underworld). Following an extraordinary denouement at the end of this Branch the depth, nature and consequence of this association is finally revealed. And with this revelation comes a deepening sense of the process of *structural and symbolic patterning* which interpenetrates all Four Branches of the Mabinogi. The Third Branch provides, in a sense, the master-key to the dream-like representational language through which the medieval author articulated his deepest intuitions. It is at this juncture that we begin to understand what the Mabinogi is all about: exactly how it ‘works’ and how it should be read.

Like the other Branches of the Mabinogi, the story of Manawydan in Dyfed is rooted in a complex amalgam of tribal history and magico-mythical symbolism. The Third Branch might be

seen, on one level, as an origin myth pertaining to the Irish element in West Wales, analogues for which might be found in the eighth-century tract ‘The Expulsion of the Sons of Déisi’ as well as the *Cath Maige Mucrama* and other traditions from the southern districts of Ireland. The Gaelic settlement of Dyfed, which reached its peak in the late Roman years, was to become a defining feature of the Ancient South. We will be considering the documentary and archaeological realities underlying this tribal-historic stratum of the Third Branch below (p. 374-382); just as we considered the Belgae in the Chapter Three and the various historical components of the ‘Indigenous Underworld’ in Chapter Two.

The mythical subtext of the Third Branch is a distinctive reinterpretation of the *wasteland scenario*: a widespread agrarian myth, overlaid by the magical thinking of the Indo-European Sovereignty cult (see p. 120-122, 189-190). A further influence was the distinctive historical experiences of the various peoples West Wales (both Gaelic and Brythonic) which resulted in a powerful combination of the theme of exile with the imagery of the Empty Land (p. 390-394). But what is most interesting (and unusual) about this motif and its treatment in the Third Branch is what Andrew Welsh calls the ‘radical ambivalence’ towards the archaic value-system involved⁶⁵⁵: to the extent that the traditional villain of the Wasteland Myth (the ‘Un-King’ as John Koch describes this figure)⁶⁵⁶ becomes momentarily identified with Manawydan, the central protagonist of the Third Branch. This inversion of the traditional Heroic Age ideology is partially latent in some of the Irish analogues of the Third Branch such as *Cath Maige Mucrama* and the Déisi origin legend alluded to above. But the author of the Mabinogi, with characteristic irony, takes this anti-heroic theme to its logical conclusion. In the Third Branch Manawydan plays out the role of the Un-King, with all the indignities that involves, which proves to be the very means of bringing about the healing of the kingdom. The magical logic underlying this inversion, and its relationship to events in the previous Branches, will be discussed in full at the end of this chapter.

By developing the traditional Celtic tale of the Un-King and the themes of exile and wandering that form the origin mythology of Demetian Déisi, the author also takes the opportunity to indulge in that most universal of popular tales – known generically to folklorists as the ‘Person Pursued by Misfortune’. From the biblical Job to the medieval St Eustace, from Voltaire’s *Candide* to cinematic anti-heroes such as Charlie Chaplin’s Tramp there is an enduring tradition of the hapless (and more or less undeserving) recipient of cumulative misfortunes. The central protagonist of such stories typically endures social persecution, followed by the loss of his wealth and material possessions, followed by bereavement and/or the misery of a disfiguring disease. Each of these reversals is met with patient resignation and humble forbearance. Often in this tale-type (as in the Third Branch) there is one final indignity which proves too much for the sufferer. He then begins to fight back or protest in some way. This sometimes precipitates a vital change in circumstances or outlook or simply brings the tale to an end, reminding the audience of the grim (yet subconsciously gratifying) realisation that there is always someone more unfortunate than oneself.

655 A. Welsh (1990) p.347

656 J. Koch (1987) p. 35 ff.

In the modern age this scenario has often been used for satiric or tragi-comedic purposes. But in pre-industrial cultures the issue of luck or misfortune was approached with utmost seriousness. In some contexts (e.g. *The Book of Job*, *the Life of St. Eustace*) the purpose was moral and spiritual edification: a meditation on the transience of the material world and the vicissitudes of fate, the aim of which was to engender fear and gratitude towards the Providence of the Divine. In other cultures the purpose of such tales might have been the disclosure of esoteric knowledge or information. How the protagonist incurs such misfortune in the first place, and, equally important, how he manages to break the curse and free himself of his run of bad luck – these are the central concerns of traditional tales of this kind. Luck, good or bad, was a concrete phenomenon in the pre-modern world, its control or appropriation was the intended effect of a complex array of carefully-crafted talismans, prayers, rituals and taboos. Stories such as that of Manawydan as told in the Third Branch deal explicitly with the issue of the occult causes of misfortune. As such, it would have been carefully considered by its medieval audience, before being assimilated into the general body of folk-wisdom relating to the nature of fate and the avoidance of misfortune.

Finally, as with the rest of the other three Branches, there is also a typological dimension to the story of Manawydan, a perspective that allowed for the veiled commentary on more contemporary events. A comparison had already been developed, as we suggested in the previous chapter, between Bendigeidfran and Gruffydd ap Llewelyn, with (by implication) a further possible relationship between the half-bothers of the former with the two successor kings (and brothers) of the latter: Bleddyn and Rhiwallon sons of Cynfyn. Rhiannon of the First Branch likewise contains echoes of the more recent ancestral figures of political significance: Nest daughter of Rhys ap Tewdwr and Elen of the old Demetian line (pp. 58, 188). Through these figures and their typological equivalents, oblique observations could be made about their contemporary descendants: prominent political-dynastic figures well-known to the audience-community of the Mabinogi.

In the Third Branch, there are similar hints of typological resemblance between the main protagonists and prominent individuals from the recent family history of the Welsh Royal tribe. Cadwgan ap Bleddyn (d. 1111 AD), for example, was described by the chroniclers as a man who preferred mediation to confrontation ‘as his custom was, not wishing to hurt anyone’.⁶⁵⁷ A resemblance to the character of Manawydan ‘the Humble Chieftain’ (*lledyf unben* p. 395, n. 687 below) is apparent in this description but also in the recorded events of 1109, the year in which the unfortunate Cadwgan was exiled and dispossessed by a hostile London-based king, and forced to wander abroad in the company of his impulsive and troublesome son Owain.⁶⁵⁸

657 ByT 1108=1111 AD. Cadwgan of the House of Mathrafal was prominent in Native Wales in the first decade of twelfth century, having played a leading role in the anti-Norman rebellions of the mid 1090s. See pp.48 ff. above.

658 ByT 1105=1109 see p.49 above.

Notwithstanding this apparent passivity and the untimely demise of his anti-type Cadwgan, there is no doubt that Manawydan is one of the few characters within the Four Branches who comes close to being presented in a wholly positive light. His patience and forbearance represents a depth of wisdom and a subtlety of mind which allows him to see through the accumulation of misfortune that is the legacy of the House of Dyfed and effectively counteract it. As Proinsias Mac Cana once suggested:

One can hardly avoid the conclusion that the author has created in Manawydan a reflection of his own personality and a vehicle for his own philosophy of life. He is the pragmatist and the peace-maker ... But his patience and tolerance were not borne of weakness ... and his tenacity appears at its most dogged and receives its complete vindication when he outstays and outsmarts the magic of Llwyd Cil Coed...⁶⁵⁹

Following this magical victory at the end of the Third Branch, the outwitted and exasperated Llwyd Cil Coed gives credit where it is due, exclaiming to Manawydan *da y medreist!*, an untranslatable phrase which I have rendered as ‘you play well!’ (p. 410, n. 753). It is clear that Manawydan is a true master of the magical game which underpins the action of the Mabinogi. His actions and insight are being presented as a moral and social exemplum and also as a case-study for esoteric edification.

659 MacCana (1992) p.47