

Lleu, Math and Gronw: the Prophesied death in the Fourth Branch

A number of elements from both of the traditional sources – the magico-religious and the tribal-historic – are evident in the extant text of the Fourth Branch. The rather lurid mixture of enforced shape-change and gender-transgression (pp. 488-490), previously thought to be unique to the Mabinogi, can be seen (by comparison with Icelandic traditions) to be have been a feature of this particular mythic tradition from its earliest stages. The pig-stealing incident, as we have suggested (pp. 459-460), might be related to a tribal-historic memory of the incoming Beaker people, and their appropriation of power in the Megalithic world. Most of all, it is the distinctive atmosphere of the Prophesied Death scenario that lingers throughout the Fourth Branch in its extant form. The familiar pattern of magical invulnerability, ironically combined with a variant of the ‘Achilles Heel’ motif, characterises more than one of the protagonists involved. Likewise the doom-laden injunctions of the Prophesied Death and the struggle against inexorable forces of fate are also defining features of the tale.

Beyond this there are at least as many differences as there are similarities between the underlying structure and the extant medieval work. The Prophesied Death tradition has been borrowed, for the medieval author’s own creative/explanatory purposes, but its structural core has been comprehensively and expertly rearranged. The Fourth Branch is no longer the story of the killing of a tyrannical old king, and his replacement by a young conquering hero (aided and abetted by a shamanic-trickster figure), although there are hints of the original myth.

The figure of Lleu’s great-uncle Math displays many of the characteristics of the doomed old king of the Prophesied Death scenario, though his original role within the story was clearly that of the shaman-helper figure (the position of Mathgen the Druid in the Irish tradition, see p. 466 above). But with his curious combination of omniscience and magical vulnerability, Math is the obvious candidate for the role of the fated Old King. However, although he is ultimately replaced as king of Gwynedd by the youthful Lleu, there is no sense of any hostility between these protagonists in the Fourth Branch. On more than one occasion Math lends magical or political assistance to Gwydion’s efforts to protect and advance the interests of the young Venedotian hero.

Equally curious is the role of Lleu himself in the events of the Fourth Branch. According to the usual Prophesied Death framework, the young hero would have occupied the role of patricidal liberator: killing his tyrannical grandfather, as Lugh did Balor, with a magical spear or similar projectile (e.g. the mistletoe spear of the Baldur myth). However, in the Fourth Branch, it is Lleu himself who is struck by this spear – under circumstances that distinctly resemble the fated, taboo-breaking conditions of the Prophesied Death scenario. The Branch is concluded with Lleu himself wielding the spear, and thereby acting out the traditional role of the hero of this myth – but only after he has himself been struck in the same way. In other words, Lleu is the victim as well as the hero of the Fourth Branch – just as Math exhibits characteristics both of the doomed king and the shaman-

821 Welsh (1990) p.358

822 Millersdaughter, Katherine. ‘The Geopolitics of Incest: Sex, Gender and Violence in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi’ *Exemplaria* 14.2 (2002) 284

helper.

Finally, Lleu's adversary Gronw can also be seen as a rather more complex figure than the tradition would normally allow. He is represented as a peer, rather than a senior of Lleu's, and a rival in love, rather than an oppressive patriarch. His role in the story is heavily influenced by certain narrative conventions that were commonplace within the Celtic world, notably the tragic Love Triangle scenario (as we will consider on pp. 527-529 below). But within the context of the Prophesied Death tradition, he wields the enchanted spear and breaks through the magical protection of his adversary – which are unambiguously the feats of the hero within the conventional version of the tale. So, mirroring the position of his opponent and rival, Gronw takes on characteristics of both the hero/conqueror and the villain/victim. Moral ambiguity of this kind, as we have seen, is entirely typical of the Mabinogi as a whole.

The figure of Math, whom we shall shortly encounter in the text of the Fourth Branch itself, is an interesting example of how certain elements of the Prophesied Death scenario have been appropriated and recombined to express contemporary political concerns as well as more perennial intuitive complexes. Math is portrayed as superhuman in his magical power, and almost godlike in his omniscience and judiciousness. His sporadic interventions serve to punish inequity and reward the just, fitting the ideal of a medieval king. Yet, for all this, there is a curious detachment about this figure – almost indifferent in his meditative withdrawal from the mundane world. His 'peculiarity' – requiring him to 'rest his feet in the lap of a virgin' – has obvious sexual connotations, but also implies a kind of regression, a re-absorption into a pre-natal state. This abnormal condition prevents him from touring the circuit of his courts – and forces him to delegate this vital aspect of Medieval Celtic kingship to his younger kinsmen: Gwydion and Gilfaethwy son of Dôn. It is perhaps this abrogation of his kingly responsibilities that suggests, more than anything else, that the sovereignty of Math was understood as fundamentally incomplete, disabled or flawed. Again there are echoes in the contemporary situation of Medieval Wales, and the Kingdom of Gwynedd in particular. We will consider these parallels on pp. 575-589 below.

The Fourth Branch cannot be described in its final form as a recognisable instance of the Prophesied Death scenario as such. Instead, what we find is a rather more refracted narrative, in which the traditional roles of hero, villain and helper are merged and rearranged. The underlying communication delivered is more involved and more restrained than its traditional source material, though it is ultimately more complex and revealing. We will see the same tendency in the sections that follow (Math II and Math III), when representation of the hero Lleu himself, and the tragic 'love-triangle' with Blodeuedd and Gronw, are also examined in the context of their associated tradition.