CONCLUSION – THE SPROUTING BRANCH

At the beginning of this study, we compared historical data to ripples in the waters of human communication – 'the buzz of rumour and invective' that radiates from the brute collision of events. The words of the Four Branches might be frozen in the form of calligraphic letters in a fourteenth-century manuscript, but they are symptomatic nonetheless of a particular state of mind – with a specific location in time, space and culture. The ripple metaphor is useful in a number of respects. It reminds us of the fluid, overwhelmingly oral context from which the Four Branches had originally emerged. Ironically similar in a number of respects to the electronic ephemera of the World Wide Web; these tales were not originally regarded as discreet authored units, but rather as the products of a looser, collective and more anonymous tradition. The canonicity of a textual grouping such as Lady Charlotte Guest's *Mabinogion* tales – or even that of the Four Branches itself – must be seen to some extent as a retrospective creation, which may not even have been recognised by its original audience. Medievalist Satoko Ito-Morino has put forward the interesting suggestion that the Mabinogi might be more accurately seen as a partial member of the 'monstrous body' of an *ongoing* narrative tradition. In reality, this tradition has no beginning and no end, but is continually splitting and proliferating; the ending of every story containing the germ of another.[1103]

In order to understand what confronts modern readers when they encounter the text of the Mabinogi, we should consider another metaphor for the work. Let the text be compared to a dried leaf-skeleton – delicate and exquisitely complex – but long since removed from its original organic context. By using the appropriate analytical tools, it is possible build up a picture of the living tree from which this leaf must have originally sprung. It roots would seem to be in myth and tribal history; its boughs the off-shoots of Medieval Romance. Around this tree has grown a tangled forest of latter-day fantasy – which itself has given rise to the nascent seedlings of Celtic neopaganism. But the ancient leaf-skeleton that is the Mabinogi reminds us of a time when the great tree at the heart of this forest was itself no more than a young sapling. What we have here is one of the earliest and most prototypical expressions of this distinctive mode of the Western imagination.

The broad cultural stream of Romance embraced Chrétien and Wolfram von Eschenbach, Shakespeare, the Elizabethan poets and even the Gothic fantasists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century but might be said to have its wellsprings in the Medieval Celtic world. The vernacular traditions of Ireland and Wales provided an exotic addition to the prevailing Franco-Roman culture, despite the military and political dominance enjoyed by it. The model of Catholic feudalism imposed by the *Francogenae* was to become the defining form of the European Middle Ages. It was from this Franco-Roman foundation that so much of what defines 'Western Civilisation' – both good and bad – might be said to have emerged: imperialism, universal suffrage, individualism, freedom of speech, materialism and scientific progress. What would have grown from a rather more

1103 Ito-Morino, S. 'The Sense of Ending in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' *Zeitschrift fur Celtische Philologie* 49 (1997) pp.341-348. A similar conclusion was reached by leading Mabinogi scholar Sioned Davies (*'Pedeir Keinc Y Mabinogi – A Case for Multiple Authorship*' in G. W. Maclennanan (ed.), P*roceedings of the first North American Congress of Celtic Studies* 1986 (Ottawa, 1988) pp. 443-459)

Celtic Middle Ages is rather harder to say, but it is safe to assume there would have been quite a different patterny of cultural development. What we find in the Mabinogi is the 'rejected cornerstone' in the history of the European mind. For this reason this narrative tradition (with its Medieval Celtic origins) has served on more than one occasion as a foundation for alternative temples of thought.

Whether the author of the Mabinogi would have felt any affinity with the likes of Horace Walpole, Mary Shelly, Kenneth Morris or John and Caitlín Matthews is a matter for speculation. The Four Branches was the product of a defiantly localised culture and represented an archaic mythopoeic system that had developed in relative independence from the dominant Roman-Christian thought-world with its Classical-Hebraic roots. There are moments in the Mabinogi when we appear to be witnessing a self-conscious opposition to the Franco-Roman culture, even down to its philosophical foundations. A native, pre-Christian solution is apparently being offered as a remedy for the complex afflictions plaguing the native communities of High Medieval Wales. But would the custodians of this unique and ancient cultural system really have seen themselves at the vanguard of a pan-European, anti-rationalist movement? All in all, it seems unlikely that these frames of reference would have meant a great deal in Medieval Wales. We would be better off regarding the Four Branches on its own terms: positioned somewhere between 'traditionalist' mainstream of Native Welsh society and the 'radical' nativism of the School of Taliesin (re: pp. 66).

Some modern readers have seen the Mabinogi as the perennial wisdom of Ghandiesque druidic sages, or the glimmering memories of a pre-Roman Arcadia. However, the evidence suggests otherwise: that the author of the Four Branches was writing from within a violent, feuding, tribalistic culture. The typological satire of the southern princes (pp. 437-439) or Llywelyn's enemies in the North (p. 578) remind us that the author of the Mabinogi was as ready to fling mockery and malice in the direction of his enemies as he was to reflect on their shared humanity as were the sharp-tongued bards of the Medieval Celtic world and even its psychotic, curse-bestowing saints.

To the modern mind, it is hard to reconcile the clear evidence of a dynastic-political bias with the production of history of any lasting value. But it is equally unlikely that our author would have even recognised this problem. The tribal-historic tradition of the Mabinogi did not aim to provide a sequential, inventoried description of the past in the manner of a modern archaeologist. Nor did it see the need for a linear 'objective' reconstruction of the past (if such a thing is indeed ever possible). Rather, the aim was to evolve a narrative paradigm that could explain the current dynastic-political balance in terms of canonical tribal history, and vice versa. That such a vision would have also suited the needs of his patron would have struck the medieval mind merely as a happy coincidence: a further demonstration of *Grace Dieu*. Indeed, before we apply the cynical verdict of modern history, and dismiss the entire work as dynastic propaganda, it is worth pausing for moment to consider the mysterious perfection with which this synthesis seems to have been manufactured. In the Four Branches we find the rhythms and fault-lines of Medieval Welsh tribal-political life – both past and present – presented, as were it were, seamlessly and at a single glance, consistent with the author's political affiliations. There is something almost a little unearthly about a literary vision of this kind,

which bears the impression of being conceived in an explosion of inspiration, the mysterious subconscious agency known in Medieval Wales as the awen or 'the breath' (re: pp. 97). As Andrew Welsh poignantly observes, that the Mabinogi is, above all else, 'haunted by duality'. Something of the inner state of medieval man – his helpless vacillations between grace and sin – is inherent within the very fibre of the Four Branches.

Studying a medieval artistic expression of this kind involves grasping a new conceptual vocabulary and attempting to view the world from a different cultural vantage point. But the value of such an exercise goes beyond a simple disclosure of the past. It is an insight into *human nature itself*: all the more so for the fact that the human experience involved was subject to conditions (both internal and external) which were significantly different to those of our own. Life in Medieval Wales may have been unimaginably hard, and tempers sometimes brutally short – but the people who composed and enjoyed works like the Mabinogi were by no means lacking in intelligence or inward sensibility. Indeed, the involved complexity of the Four Branches (and other related medieval tales) itself suggests that aspects of their psychic apparatus were actually *more* finely tuned than seems to be the case in the television-dulled, sloganised consciousness of today. Beyond this, we might remember that the transformative moments of birth and death were not the remote, hospital-bound strangers they have become in our own times; but lay close to the surface of everyday experience. This sensibility may account for a certain concentrated intensity about the medieval mind: a quality of bitter-sweet yearning, both heightened and tempered by an awareness of the brevity of life. The medieval artist's passion for the splendour of light and form should be seen against the background of this lingering sadness – the veiled source of the enduring beauty of these works.