PEERING INTO THE SHADOWS:
USING THE FOUR BRANCHES OF THE MABINOGI TO EXPLORE
PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL WELSH SOCIETY

Stephanie O'Donoghue

Student number: 1402142

MA Medieval Studies Dissertation

Faculty of Humanities and Performing Arts

Supervisor: Professor Janet Burton

University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter 2018

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

Declaration Form

1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Name..Stephanie O'Donoghue ……………………………………………...

Date ……22nd September 2018 ……………………………………………...

2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of ………MA Medieval Studies…………………..................................

Name… ………Stephanie O'Donoghue ……………………………………….

Date ……………22nd September 2018 ………………….……….…………...

3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references.

A bibliography is appended.

Name……Stephanie O'Donoghue……………………………….………………

Date: ……22nd September 2018……………………...………………………

4. I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying, inter- library loan, and for deposit in the University's digital repository

Name……Stephanie O'Donoghue…………………………………………….

Date………22nd September 2018…………….…………………………..

Supervisor's Declaration.

I am satisfied that this work is the result of the student's own efforts.

Signed: ……………………………………………………………………...

Date: ……………………………………………………………………..

PEERING INTO THE SHADOWS:

Using the Four Branches of the Mabinogi to explore perceptions of women in medieval Welsh society

ABSTRACT

There is a lack of sources for medieval Wales, and for the lives of women in particular. The objective of this dissertation, therefore, is to establish whether a close reading of the Mabinogi can provide any detail about the ways medieval Welsh women were perceived by their contemporaries. The nature of the text is discussed and the potential limitations of using works of fiction as primary sources are considered. Gender roles and the place of women in society are examined, before looking at how pervasive the Welsh Law of Women might have been in everyday life. The representation of women's emotions in the text is also appraised. The conclusion reached is about where the Four Branches of the Mabinogi fit into the larger body of work acting as conduct literature created to control and manipulate women's behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

"The position of women is often considered as a test by which the civilisation of a country or age may be judged"[1]

The relevance of the above quote, written by Eileen Power in the first half of the twentieth century, has not diminished with time and may be applied with equal validity to any period of human life, from prehistory to the present. Much has been made of the existence of a separate law tract, generally known as the Welsh Law of Women, as evidence for the high regard in which women were held in medieval Welsh society. This has often been emphasised as being of great contrast to their English counterparts. However, difficulties arise when trying to determine the position or place of women in any particular society. Power noted that "a social position is never solely created by theoretical notions; it owes more to the inescapable pressure of facts, the give and take of daily life".[2] Thus, it can be argued, the existence of the law code does not in itself prove anything about the position of women unless we are also able to examine how that code was observed (or not) in daily life. Finding sources with which to investigate further is not straightforward. Medieval Wales has not left anything like the volume of documentary evidence to be found for the corresponding period in England. Most books on medieval history barely mention Wales, if at all, and the situation is even worse when looking for any reference to women from the period. For example, Lisa Bitel's "Women in Early Medieval Europe" makes a single, general reference to the "Celts of Gaul, Britain and Ireland" and

---

[1] Eileen Power, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 1.
[2] Power, p. 2.

contains one solitary reference to the Mabinogi, citing it as an example of a text with "echoes of a gendered landscape, replete with feminine influences".[3] Although the increased interest in women's history and the growth of Celtic studies as an area of research within academia is slowly altering this position, the fact remains that there are comparatively very few primary sources for historians of medieval Wales. As Richards has observed, whatever the reason for the increased interest in medieval Welsh history from modern historians, it is still a fact that women do not really form part of the histories being written. Where they do appear, they have often merely been relegated to the background. It is therefore important to look at all possible options. The use of prose literature as a historical source is not new and can provide information which cannot be captured from more traditional sources which tend to be the bureaucratic output of a part of society concerned primarily with facts and figures. This work is not intended as a study of the Mabinogi itself, rather it is an examination of its usefulness in understanding the place of women in medieval Welsh society and the possible influences on their sense of self and being.

The Four Branches of the Mabinogi are short, prose tales, originating as 'oral literature' but probably written down in the fourteenth century and first translated into English in 1795 by William Pughe. They contain some fantastical elements but are also clearly rooted in a recognisable medieval world. It is therefore possible that a close reading of these texts could allow a

---

[3] Lisa M. Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 38.

picture to be built up that shows how women were perceived within, and by, contemporary Welsh society in the medieval period.

When using a work of fiction as a historical source, it is vital not to lose sight of the fact that it is just that: fiction, the product of someone's imagination. However, that person (or persons) will necessarily be of their time and their morals, codes and overall world view will have been shaped by the society of which they are a member.

What exactly is 'perception' and how can this be determined from reading the text? The Oxford English Dictionary gives the definition of perception as "a direct recognition of something; an intuitive insight; an understanding. Also: an interpretation or impression based upon such an understanding; an opinion or belief". For the purposes of this essay, it is the latter part of this definition that is pertinent. By examining the stories of the Mabinogi and the opinions, judgements and beliefs that they appear to reflect, it is hoped to put together a picture of how medieval Welsh society viewed women and how they expected them to fit into that society both as individuals and in relation to its other members. How the perceptions can be established at a distance of several hundred years is not straightforward. It is very important not to try and impose modern, twenty-first century ideas and social constructs onto the thoughts and compositions of a medieval author. Conversely, in the absence of sufficient other sources to give a definitive picture to use as a baseline, there will be a degree of extrapolation and interpretation required. Since perceptions are by their very nature subjective, one very important preliminary point is to try to determine whose perceptions we are considering. Once this is established, an attempt can be made to divide them

into those perceptions that can be supported by, or in their turn support, other sources and those which are less tangible but provide evidence for 'softer' aspects of life such as emotions or character traits.

Where should we, as modern readers, get our ideas of expectations and standards and what should be looked for when considering the perceptions of the medieval audience? We can consider gender roles and how these may have been predefined and split clearly between male and female. We can examine how anyone who stepped outside of their expected role was viewed by their contemporaries. If there were certain ideals and standards for female behaviour, from where were these derived and how were they shared and communicated? It will be possible to look for evidence of female education and any indication of how this was regarded. There may be mention of women taking part in trade or managing estates or households. Slightly more difficult to extract but still of use will be any evidence pointing towards women's emotions and intelligence and how these aspects of the female character fitted into the larger picture of society. How many of the female characters bear children? Is there any perceivable difference in the attitude of the author either to the same characters before and after reproduction or any suggestion of a judgemental approach to women who are childless? How is the matter of female sexuality treated in the text?

It may also be possible to use the texts to try to gain some idea of how much control women of the period had over their lives and destiny, although certain assumptions may need to be made. For example, whether or not the female characters can be used to represent the general experience of women. It will be necessary to ask what possible reasons there might be that mean any

perceptions are not representative, at least of the general, pervading attitudes within society. Other areas to examine include whether anything within the text shows concern with certain practices or actions? If so, can any of the plots or story arcs concerning the female characters have been intended to act as a warning or reprimand? Was Welsh society ahead of its time in its view of women, or was it old-fashioned and a relic of a different period? Is there any way to calculate the 'worth' of the female characters and compare it to that of the men?

After considering the political situation in medieval Wales, the surviving sources, and the advantages and disadvantages of using prose literature to supplement other sources, the evidence from the Four Branches which can inform our existing knowledge regarding gender roles and medieval life, customs and laws will be discussed in more detail. The Four Branches therefore may show us an idealised or fictitious picture of medieval Welsh society but by looking to small details and inferring from minor incidents it may be possible to arrive at a truer perception of everyday life and women's position within it. Among other secondary sources, this essay will draw upon the work already done by Roberta Valente on the wider subject of the women in the Mabinogi, the collection of essays on the Welsh Law of Women edited by Morfydd E. Owen and Dafydd Jenkins, and the newer approach to the consideration of women's emotions in medieval culture typified by the work of Lisa Perfetti.

THE NATURE OF THE TEXT

There is now an established basis for using works of fiction as historical sources and Wendy Pfeffer writes that "Literary texts can be sources of sociocultural information about any time period".[4] In fact, it could be argued that works of fiction are particularly useful in comparison to other primary sources as they allow the modern reader to view how their characters (and by extension, real women and men) were perceived, or intended to be perceived, by their contemporaries. However, there are obviously also some limitations and disadvantages to using literary sources. Their use of recognisable structures and stock characters can tell us about the experiences and intentions of both the storytellers and the intended audience, but literature can exaggerate and overemphasise certain characteristics or situations out of a necessity to create dramatic tension or to move a plot forward.

It is generally accepted that although the Four Branches, in the versions that have survived to today, were probably written in the fourteenth century, the tales they contain belong to an earlier period. This gives rise to a potential problem when trying to use them as a historical source as it may not be immediately apparent what is the work of the original author and what has been changed, deleted or inserted by a later redactor. It can be asserted though that the stories must have been felt to be of sufficient interest or merit to have been preserved through several centuries. As Caldecott has pointed

---

[4] Wendy Pfeffer, 'Constant Sorrow: Emotions and the Women Trouvères', in *The Representation of Women's Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, p. 119.

out, the stories are told over and over again not because there was a shortage of stories but because they had something important to say.[5]

As previously mentioned, the Mabinogi was originally written down in medieval Welsh and thus, for the majority of historians, any study necessitates the use of a translated version. The modern translation of the Mabinogi used for this work is that produced by Professor Sioned Davies, first published by Oxford University Press in 2007. Before this work was published one of the standard texts generally used was that of Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones published in 1948. The two versions differ in some key areas, mainly that of the style of language used, with Davies' being less dated and less awkward to the modern reader. For example, in the First Branch Jones and Jones translate a description of Arawn's appearance as "a garment of brownish-grey stuff about him by way of a hunting garb". Davies opts for the much more concise but no less informative "wearing hunting clothes of a light grey material".[6]

One of the major criticisms levelled at fiction as a historical source is that the author had no need to adhere to any facts, so there is a large degree of doubt whether what they say can be trusted. Sims-Williams has discussed the pitfalls of trying to interpret the Four Branches literally and is critical of what he terms "literary history … by insinuation".[7] However, as long as the reader does not lose sight of the fact that they are dealing with a work of fiction there is no reason why literary material cannot be used exactly as any

---

[5] Moyra Caldecott, *Women in Celtic Myth* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1992), p. 2.

[6] *The Mabinogion*, trans. by Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 8.

[7] Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 33.

other primary source. Since we are dealing with works of fiction, it is entirely valid to question whether any of the characters, female or male, can provide an insight of use to the historian. Perhaps they are all complete figments of the author's imagination, with no basis in fact or real life at all. This idea, however, runs contrary to the principles underpinning just about every work of fiction ever written. Even the most futuristic piece of science fiction or fantastical tale will contain frames of reference with which its intended audience will be familiar. We can therefore assume with some degree of certainty that many of the details contained within the Four Branches would have been familiar to the intended audience. This would explain the lack of explanatory detail: there was no need to spend time going over facts or situations that everyone listening or reading would know very well from their everyday lives.

One of the basic tenets of historical study is that all sources contain bias to some degree. The question that needs to be answered is whether that bias is any more pronounced in a work of fiction. New ways of looking at evidence are continually being found and one of the areas most relevant to the subject of this essay is that of the critical analysis of medieval texts. There is not room in this essay to consider this in any detail but a quote from Finke and Shichtman's introduction to the book of essays they edited on medieval texts and critical theory is particularly relevant:

"Contemporary readers never experience medieval texts directly, unambiguously, or ahistorically. Their reading is always mediated in highly complex ways by the scholarly activities that make these texts accessible:

the editions, glosses, textual notes, manuscript facsimiles, transcriptions, and translations through which medieval literature is filtered and transmitted."[8]

It is important to ask oneself whether it is ever truly possible to evaluate a medieval source without imposing one's own modern ideas and values upon it. Can we quantify how much of what we derive from the material is fact and how much is extrapolation or interpretation? This is something that is of equal concern when considering that the texts as we have them today are the end result of a lengthy process of reproduction and redaction. Davies has discussed the process of 'stepping outside', which would allow a redactor to consciously or unconsciously insert material or references from his own period and this is obviously something which must be taken into account when attempting to interpret the Four Branches.[9]

The identities of both the original author (or authors) and any subsequent redactors are unknown. However, more men than women were literate in medieval Europe and consequently most of what we know about medieval women was written by men. It would obviously be very useful to know if the author of the Mabinogi was female or male as each possibility would lead to an entirely different reading of the text and a consideration of how the perceptions and interpretations of the sexes might have differed. The author was entirely in control of who should be included in the historical documents that we study today, who should have a presence in the written record and who should be lost and forgotten forever. Does the same apply today and mean that a female reader will have a significantly different experience of the

[8] *Medieval Texts & Contemporary Readers*, ed. by Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 1.
[9] Sioned Davies, 'Storytelling in Medieval Wales', *Oral Tradition*, 7.2 (1992), p. 236.

text to a male reader? The most notable proponent of the theory of a female author for the Four Branches is Andrew Breeze. His entire hypothesis is based on the idea that it should be possible to deduce the sex of an author from the subjects included in their work, and their attitudes towards those subjects. His theory has met with almost universal disagreement, with Luft pointing out his, frankly almost insulting, arguments for the gendering of the subjects and his tendency to either cherry-pick or completely ignore other contemporary authors if they do not support his theory.[10] It is therefore most likely that the author(s) or redactor(s) of the Four Branches were male. Fiona Winward has noted that, although this is probably the case, there is some reason to suppose that they may have been influenced to a great degree by their female relatives and cites the character of Rhiannon, with her skill for manipulation and influencing, as an example of this. She feels that the author certainly shows an awareness of the intelligence and ability of women and the different ways that these characteristics are employed in the tales.[11] This is not to say, however, that the overall tone is pro-women, since a degree of sexism might be detected in the constant references to, for example, manipulation. Alternatively, this could just be a realistic acknowledgement of women making use of one of the few methods of influence open to them.

As previously mentioned, with all historical sources there is an inherent bias in the material. In the case of a work of fiction unlike, for example, a legal record this bias may have arisen from a much greater number of sources.

---

[10] Diana Luft, 'Review of "The Origin of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi"', *Beltaine*, 27.2 (2010), p. 10.
[11] Fiona Winward, 'Some Aspects of the Women in The Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 34.Winter (1997), p. 106.

There will be the original author, performers and oral storytellers who have passed on the tales, and the redactor or redactors who produced the medieval manuscripts we have today. As discussed, a source of potential bias that needs to be addressed and allowed for, is that since the majority of modern scholars of the period do not read Welsh, they are completely dependent on the work of a translator. A brief comparison of the 1948 translation by Jones and Jones with that of Professor Davies made in 2007 shows that there are many differences arising from both the choice of language, and conscious or unconscious judgement about the value of the content.

An example of the limitations of the Four Branches to the researcher of the medieval period can be seen when considering the descriptions of women's dress contained in the text. Valente has noted that these all follow the same, static formula with no detail. She feels that this allows the author to focus instead on the abstract qualities of personality and social conduct, without being distracted by elements which play no part in driving the story's action forwards.[12] The actions and events of the Mabinogi have the, at least superficial, effect of reducing many of the female characters to chattels, to be used, exchanged and bargained for, and on initial inspection the language used reflects this. The generic formulae used to describe the female characters' appearances, always the most beautiful women ever beheld, dressed in the finest clothes, but with no individual detail adds to the suggestion that women were viewed as decorative ornaments. However,

---

[12] Roberta L. Valente, '"Merched y Mabinogi": Women and the Thematic Structure of the Four Branches' (unpublished Ph.D., Cornell University, 1986), p. 107.

Valente has seen this as an example of the Bardic rules, which were concerned only with abstract qualities such as personality and social behaviour while referring to physical beauty merely in general terms.[13] Removing any emphasis on appearance allows the author to focus their audience's interest instead on the actions, both passive and active, of the characters and the corresponding outcomes and interactions.

It is interesting to compare the language that is used to describe the female and male characters. For example, can anything be suggested by the terms of address used towards the female characters in the stories? The male characters are addressed using terms that either denote their rank in society (sir, lord, noblemen), are purely descriptive (men, groom) or show a degree of affection (friend). The female characters are addressed with regard to their rank (lady), position in society relative to a man (my lady, my wife) or their apparent age or sexual status (maiden).

As the following table shows, there are many more terms used to enhance the description of the male characters than there are for the women:

Adjectives used to describe the male characters	Adjectives used to describe the female characters
happy, perceptive, kind, regal, stupid, wise, learned, best, strong, sturdy, considerate, handsome, fairest, accomplished, beloved, good, quarrelsome, large, huge,	beautiful, noble, gracious, obstinate, wretched, fine, excellent, fair, fairest, wicked, angry

---

[13] Valente, p. 113.

monstrous, evil, ugly, angry, fierce, ruthless, great, serious, wretched	

Although this can be partly explained by the fact that the Four Branches feature a greater number of male than female characters, there is still a distinct difference in the tone of language used for each gender. The adjectives describing the women are split almost equally between those that indicate positive qualities and those indicating negativity. By contrast the descriptors for the men describe three times as many positive attributes as negative ones.

One aspect of the Four Branches that has a significant bearing on any modern attempt at an interpretation of perceptions is the consideration of who the original intended audience might have been. Although the surviving copies of the texts are found in books that would have been expensive to produce and would only have been available to the wealthier among society, this does not mean that these wealthy individuals were the people for whom the tales were created. As Sioned Davies has pointed out, Welsh sources imply that the prose tales were recited by professional storytellers.[14] However, she also notes that there is "a paucity of evidence" about the role.[15] The relationship between the tales in their written form and the assumed earlier oral versions is not clear. It may be that the stories were written down by the storytellers themselves, but it is equally likely that they were conceived and composed by writers using the earlier traditions as

[14] Sioned Davies, 'Storytelling', p. 231.
[15] ibid., p. 232.

sources of inspiration. The main purpose of any storyteller or author is to entertain but Davies argues that, since the original meaning of the Welsh word used for "tale" was closer to "traditional lore", the *cyfarwydd* or storyteller was in fact "the guide, well-informed person, expert" and the stories themselves were originally viewed as informative and instructive.[16] It may be that a decline in the number of storytellers giving traditional oral performances gave rise to the need to make permanent records of the texts. However, whatever the method by which the material was disseminated, the audience would essentially remain the same. The high status of poets and storytellers in medieval society and the position of their work as one of the prime means of entertainment would allow them access to all levels of society. Their patrons might be the nobility but those lower down the social scale would have been present during performances, even if it was only an incidental result of their working roles. The essential vocal nature of the tales implies that they were to be read aloud to a listening audience and that they invited a certain amount of interactivity.[17]

There is a distinct lack of overt sexual, sensual or bawdy content in the texts and this is highlighted when comparing them to other medieval stories such as the Canterbury Tales. This may be an indication that the author was perhaps a cleric, such as Sulien, bishop of St David's, or his son Rhigyfarch, as suggested by Davies.[18] She highlights various forms of words which she sees as the writer trying to distance themselves from the traditional material,

---

[16] Sioned Davies, 'Storytelling', p. 233.
[17] Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. xxxi.
[18] Sioned Davies, 'Storytelling', p. 236.

something that seems more likely if the redactor was a learned Christian.[19]

Since it is generally agreed that the Four Branches were probably part of a larger collection of tales, it is impossible to know whether their tone would have been reflected across the entire work. It is not fanciful, however, to suggest that a society which formulated laws specifically to address the condition of the female sex might take a pragmatic view of women's deeds and actions.

GENDER ROLES AND MEDIEVAL LIFE

Can the position of the Four Branches within the corpus of historical sources for women's lives in medieval Wales be established? It is a generally accepted fact that the quantity of primary sources available to the medieval historian differs greatly between England and Wales. This is due in part to the absence or late adoption of the English bureaucratic system but also a result of the apparent destruction of a great volume of early Welsh manuscripts with only partial survivals in collections compiled several centuries later than the probable dates of composition. Meecham-Jones quotes Daniel Huws estimate that fewer than one in one hundred medieval manuscripts have survived in Wales, although he considered it likely that at least one in five medieval manuscripts written in Welsh were still extant.[20] In

---

[19] Sioned Davies, 'Storytelling', p. 236.

[20] D. Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts* in *Authority and Subjugation in Writing of Medieval Wales*, ed. by Ruth Kennedy and Simon Meecham-Jones (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 5.

fact, Davies felt that "the available source material is quite inadequate to resolve the simplest problems".[21]

The paucity of evidence is not particularly due to the number of different types of source that can be considered, as most of the classes of material that are available to the researcher into medieval English life are also available to the researcher of medieval Wales. It is rather that the absolute numbers of these sources are comparatively small in the absence of the large body of legal documents produced by a long-lived feudal system. By the fifteenth century the difference between Wales and its near neighbours was even more pronounced. In the opinion of R. Ian Jack, "the decay of historical writing in the later Middle Ages is far more marked in Wales even than in England, which in turn is impoverished in the fifteenth century compared to France or Burgundy".[22] It becomes necessary therefore to look for alternatives. There is potential to include funerary sculpture, illuminated manuscripts, poetry and prose literature but, in truth, there is great difficulty in finding evidence specific to women in the written or archaeological record. Much of this stems from the fact that for many hundreds of years, Britain has been a patriarchal society and that history has in the main been written by men, for men. Jack commented on the "lopsided" remains of Welsh historical literature and pointed out that, for a variety of reasons, this was a common issue found throughout the archives of Wales.[23] However, as Valente has pointed out, the majority of the dominant characters in the Mabinogi are

---

[21] Wendy Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1989), p. 1.
[22] R. Ian Jack, *Medieval Wales*, The Sources of History: Studies in the Uses of Historical Evidence (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), p. 46.
[23] ibid., p. 46.

women.[24] Although simply counting the number of protagonists gives a figure for men almost double that for women, characters such as Rhiannon, Branwen, Aranrhod and Blodeuedd are central to the stories, their actions actively driving the plots. As central characters, any perceptions, representations or judgements, whether overt or more subtle, would have been clearly presented to the audience. To quote Moyra Caldecott, the reason for writing about the female characters is not because "women are any more important than men but because they are no less important".[25]

What was the political situation in Wales at the time that the Four Branches were being preserved in written form? The country was divided between the portion known as the Marches that was occupied by the Anglo-Normans, where their rule of law pertained, and the Principality, that part of the country which was ruled by the Welsh princes and was subject to Welsh law. A further jurisdiction pertained in the English planted settlements in Wales. Sheehan notes that the medieval Welsh formed a linguistically and culturally distinct population within the island of Britain and were consequently marginalised in the processes which shaped the period politically and intellectually.[26] In principle at least, both English and Welsh laws applied to all subjects who lived in the relevant regions, regardless of their class, however, the English legal codes were foreign laws, imposed by an aggressive occupier. It is highly likely that the content of the Four Branches was influenced by this, for example, an emphasis on Welsh laws and

---

[24] Valente, p. 93.
[25] Caldecott, p. 2.
[26] Sarah Sheehan, 'Matrilineal Subjects: Ambiguity, Bodies and Metamorphosis in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi', *Signs*, 34.2 (2009), p. 320.

customs could be seen as an act of nationalism. Equally, the differences between Welsh and English society might have been deliberately exaggerated in the stories as a subtle act of rebellion and a reminder to the audience of how things used to be and perhaps how they ought to be again. This could be seen as counterproductive since some have argued that the Anglo-Normans themselves deliberately exploited Welsh cultural differences in order to paint the entire country and its people as "other" and apart from the dominant English nation.[27] Meecham-Jones posited the theory of a longstanding, at times unconscious, process of denial by English society in areas such as the legitimacy of Welsh legal codes, and Welsh linguistic and cultural traditions which has resulted in the paucity of references, both contemporary and modern, to medieval Wales.[28]

Much has been made of the possibility that the Mabinogi may be echoing a matriarchal past. Is this something for which evidence exists or merely a fanciful suggestion? Beresford Ellis notes that several authors have argued that the perceived degree of power and freedom experienced by Celtic women has been exaggerated.[29] He further quotes Markel's opinion that the Celts merely took longer than other societies to "rid themselves of social practices inherited from earlier gynaeocratic societies", a statement which pointedly removes any virtue from the position and instead merely makes it a consequence of a less dynamic (and by implication, inferior) culture.[30]

---

[27] Sheehan, p. 320.
[28] Kennedy and Meecham-Jones, p. 3.
[29] Peter Beresford Ellis, *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature* (London: Constable, 1995), p. 16.
[30] ibid., p. 18.

The only suggestion of a link with a matrilineal society in the Four Branches is in the naming of some of the characters, such as the children of Dôn, a possible cognate of the Irish goddess Danu. But a matrilineal society is not the same as a matriarchy. There is no real evidence to claim that the Four Branches reflect a period when women occupied the principal positions of power and influence. Rather it could be said that the stories show a certain tendency to be matrifocal. One of the key considerations about the female characters, indeed of the entire Four Branches, is whether they represent medieval society or are a lingering echo of an earlier Celtic time. There have been many words written about where the divide can be judged to lie and yet there does not seem to be a general consensus. Perhaps this is because of the absence of any epoch-defining event or moment in the text which could give a definitive answer. Certainly, it is not simply the case that Celtic equates to pre-Christian, as the Celtic Christian church played an important role in early medieval society. It may be better to think instead of the difference in terms of social structures.

It might also be more accurate to look at the dichotomy as existing between the two forms of Christianity rather than as between medieval and Celtic? Is it in fact legitimate to talk of a dichotomy at all? All the evidence points to the women of the period existing as both Celtic and medieval, with no apparent conflict between the two definitions except in the eyes of the modern reader, trying to pigeonhole and categorise them.

Some readers have found what they believe to be echoes of the concept of a mother goddess or remnants of a matrilineal society in the Four Branches. This has been sometimes offered as an example of the Celtic nature of the

Welsh nation rather than a reflection of the oral origins of the text. The cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary was very popular in the medieval period and there are many references to her throughout the stories of the Mabinogi, generally in the form of oaths or exclamations. It may be that she has perhaps taken on the role of a replacement mother goddess, her inclusion part of the Christianisation of Welsh culture.[31] Further echoes can be seen in the characters of Rhiannon and Branwen, both of whom bear sons who are subsequently taken from them by death or dark forces. By contrast, the role of Eve is taken by Blodeuedd. Created by a being with otherworldly powers, she transgresses against her creator and is punished for her boldness.

Bitel claims that "bad" women were generally more interesting to medieval storytellers, since portraying their misdeeds helped to contribute to an ideology that justified the subjugation of all women.[32] When considering the female characters of the Four Branches, only Aranrhod and Blodeuedd might be perceived as bad, although it is truer to see them as merely reacting to wrongs perpetrated on them by others. By contrast, Gwydion and Efnysien, for example, deliberately commit "bad" deeds and, certainly in the case of the latter, are portrayed as having an intrinsically destructive and disruptive nature. The women's badness is presented as though it forms an unavoidable part of their character rather than being a result of conscious decision on their part to commit specific acts of badness.

With the exception of Rhiannon's serving women, all of the female characters in the Four Branches are drawn from the nobility. This

---

[31] Beresford Ellis, p. 37.
[32] Bitel, p. 8.

perpetuates the situation found in much written history, where the majority of

the population are invisible within the historical record. It needs to be asked,

therefore, whether it is possible to extrapolate any conclusions reached by

considering the upper classes in a way that can provide meaningful

information about the members of society lower down the social order. There

were certain constants in women's lives regardless of the class to which they

belonged. The social codes and relationships which are represented in the

Four Branches applied to all degrees of people and the importance of

adhering to and preserving them was seen as necessary for society to

function properly. If anything, highly born women had less freedom in some

areas of their lives than their lower-class sisters. Their virginity carried a

higher value since they were intended to produce heirs and continue

bloodlines. Their husband or father's higher status meant that they had

further to fall if their female relative's actions or conduct brought shame upon

them.

Aside from the issue of whether the characters in the Four Branches are

representative of historical Celtic or Christian women, it has further been

suggested that most, if not all, of the female characters in the Mabinogi seem

to be cultural echoes of earlier Celtic goddesses. Beresford Ellis sees many

of the characters, male and female, as representations of the children of

Dôn/Danu.[33] He claims that in Celtic myth, these beings represent and define

the sexual roles in Celtic society and the Four Branches contain examples of

the power of female sexuality and sexual attraction.[34] The sexual nature of

---

[33] Beresford Ellis, p. 26.
[34] ibid., p. 27.

the female characters is not explicitly commented upon in the Mabinogi, however, we know that several of them are sexually active either by direct reference, for example, Rhiannon, Branwen and Blodeuedd, or by reference to their status as pregnant or as mothers, such as Aranrhod or Llwyd ap Cil Coed's wife. In several cases the characters are shown, by their direct actions or by the phrasing of the text, to be active and willing participants in sexual relationships. Rhiannon and Pwyll spend their wedding night in "pleasure and contentment", while Blodeuedd's mutual attraction to Gronw leads her to initiate a physical relationship between them and to prevent his leaving her when he asks for permission to depart. Arawn's wife and Goewin are both shown as a source of sexual temptation, one resisted and the other taken by force. Aranrhod, despite giving birth to two children, is an essentially asexual character. When questioned about her virgin status she gives the reply "that is my belief". This is ambiguous as it could be taken either as proof of her innocence and naivety about something that has happened to her, or it could be a deliberately deceitful response to try and deny having lost her virginity before marriage. If Beresford Ellis's suggestion that Aranrhod's sons are the product of incest is considered, her reply may be indicative that, since she was not a willing participant in the act, she views her virgin status as unviolated in her opinion.[35]

It is not clear whether the possible euhemerised origin of some of the women in the Four Branches has any bearing on their fates. Of the main female characters, Rhiannon and Aranrhod have been claimed as a horse goddess and moon or dawn goddess respectively, while Branwen is the daughter of a

---

[35] Beresford Ellis, p. 61.

sea god. It is only Blodeuedd who has not had an origin as a deity suggested for her but even her character was created using the magic of Gwydion and Math. There is a danger that too much focus on the mythological aspects of the characters could lead to their historical aspects being overlooked. Since the aim of this essay is to examine perceptions from a historical viewpoint, the mythological need not be dwelt on but must always remain at the forefront of the mind when drawing any conclusions.

The archetypal stages of adult female life are featured in the Four Branches: the maiden, the mother, and the crone, as they are sometimes described. Their treatment and the way their characters are depicted differs depending on the life stage. To take Rhiannon as an example, before she is married (when she is presumably a virgin) she is shown to be otherworldly and in possession of, if not actually magical, then certainly non-human powers. She is confident and socially at ease, whereas Pwyll seems gauche and immature by comparison. Once they are married, however, she seems powerless to defend herself against the unjust accusation of her serving women, entreating them to tell the truth but not standing up for herself, and accepting her punishment without even attempting to argue her case. Later in her life, in her interactions with her second husband, she seems to revert to a confident, active and outspoken woman. Despite the greater focus of the action of the First Branch relating to her courtship and marriage with Pwyll, it is, to quote Mac Cana, the "wise and prudent Manawydan who is her equal".[36] She is shown to diminish and lose power upon the transitions from virgin, to wife, to mother, even as her wisdom and intelligence could be

---

[36] P. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi* in Valente, p. 76.

interpreted as growing greater. As Cartwright has noted, the idea that virgins possessed supernatural powers is commonly found in folk literature. Once virginity is lost, so too are the powers.[37]

Do the female characters in the Four Branches conform to the ideal of medieval womanhood or are they instead more typical of the reality of the majority of the women in this period? For example, most of, but not all, the female characters belong to the noble classes and none of them is portrayed as particularly religious or following a religious way of life which might be something that we would expect of women of their rank during the period in question. None of the childless women in the Four Branches is shown to be seeking divine assistance in the form of prayer or visiting a shrine, another activity that was widespread at the time.

Before any discussion is possible, it will be necessary to establish exactly what is meant by 'ideal' or 'typical' in this instance. Where do our ideas and examples come from, how affected are they by our own personal biases and experience, what were the medieval community's expectations and, more generally, what was the contemporary culture's understanding of them as women? Eileen Power points out that, when considering medieval ideas about women, it is important not only to consider the ideas themselves but to examine closely the sources from which they are derived. She goes on to say that:

---

[37] Jane Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose', in *Medieval Virginities* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), p. 60.

"the expressed opinion of any age depends on the persons and the classes who happen to articulate it; and for this reason alone it often represents the views of a small but vocal minority"[38]

Is it possible to establish who this minority might have been in medieval Wales? It is generally accepted that most written works of the period were produced by celibate, male clerics, although the form and subject matter of the Mabinogi makes this perhaps less likely. Despite the attempts by Andrew Breeze, discussed earlier, to suggest a female author for the Four Branches, the idea has been largely dismissed by the majority of academics. Some, such as Sioned Davies, favour instead the theory that the Four Branches are the work of a high-ranking Welsh cleric or lawyer.[39] Either of these would belong to a section of society that could truthfully be described as an elite minority.

To refer to Power again, her opinion was that life in the middle ages was one of "rough and ready equality", with both man and woman being necessary, complementary parts of daily life.[40]

Alongside the literary portrayal of women as being on one side of the Virgin Mary/Eve dichotomy there existed the concept of courtly love and the chivalric code. Although chivalric ideals were probably only acknowledged within a small aristocratic caste and were neither professed by, nor applicable to members of lower social orders it is possible that they were viewed by all levels of society as an essential romantic ingredient for the

---

[38] Power, p. 1.
[39] Sioned Davies, 'Storytelling', p. 236.
[40] Power, p. 26.

tales they enjoyed as entertainment. Valente has noted that the episode with

Pwyll and Arawn's wife contains an exemplary relating of the manners

required in a male-female relationship.[41] This is a justifiable description of the

encounter but what is harder to determine is whether Pwyll's behaviour is out

of respect for the woman or for her husband. Under medieval Welsh law, any

offences by a third party against a wife were essentially offences against her

husband since any physical assault was an infringement of his protection

and a cause of dishonour to him.[42] In his discussion of the *nau kynywedi*

teithiauc or nine lawful unions, Charles-Edwards shows that serious insult

could be offered to a woman if a man has sexual relations with her by means

of a deception.[43] Although Arawn's wife was unaware of the true identity of

the person with whom she was sharing a bed, Pwyll would have been fully

aware of his potential to offend and, despite having Arawn's permission,

chose to act honourably and according to the established social code.

Valente argues that although Arawn has waived his own right to sarhaed, his

wife still has the right not to have her protection violated.[44]

Society expected women to be care givers. This role extended to include

providing and serving food to their relatives and visitors, tending armour,

dressing wounds and giving favours. Within the stories of the Four Branches

these behaviours are evidenced and most pointedly used by Gwydion to trick

Aranrhod into arming her son. The role of women as household managers,

with an associated organisational ability seems to have been particularly

---

[41] Valente, p. 140.
[42] Morfydd E. Owen, 'Shame and Reparation: Women's Place in the Kin', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, pp. 44–77 (p. 56).
[43] T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Nau Kynywedi Teithiauc', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, pp. 25–43 (p. 38).
[44] Valente, p. 144.

important for the upper classes, where no concept of women undertaking a trade or profession was entertained. In Le Livre des Trois Vertus written by Christine de Pisan around 1406 there is a full inventory of the abilities which a noblewoman living on her husband's estate ought to possess.[45] In fact, she ultimately also had to be capable of replacing her husband during any absences, not just on their estates but by acting as his representative in dealings with the wider world.

None of the female characters in the Four Branches has her own profession or trade. While this might not be expected since the majority of the women are from the upper classes, it is highlighted in the Third Branch when Cigfa does not help with any of the work undertaken by Manawydan, even when they are the only remaining members of their group. Does this tell us anything about attitudes to female labour? Since there is not even any suggestion that either she, or Rhiannon before her enchanted confinement, take part in the work despite both Manawydan and Pryderi doing so, it can be conjectured that it would have been unthinkable for a Welsh noblewoman to have demeaned herself by carrying out manual work or entering a trade.

What evidence is there that the female characters of the Four Branches received an education? At the period in question, the education of women was mainly vocational and consisted of what we would now describe as manners and accomplishments. However, it would also be assumed that noblewomen might be able to read and write. For example, in the romance of "Flamenca", a lady is described as being better able to bear her suffering

[45] Power, p. 35.

because she could cheer herself up by reading.[46] Alternatively, though, there are examples from the period of men forbidding women to read and write. What little can be deduced from the Four Branches regarding women's education relates principally to etiquette, manners and housecraft, for example the emphasis placed on being good conversationalists, able to arrange feasts and entertain guests. However, there are also hints that some of the characters would have received a more formal, intellectual instruction. After Branwen has taught the starling to speak she gives it a letter for her brother, presumably written by her since there is no suggestion of any sympathetic support at her husband's court. Regardless of the type of education indicated, the focus remains the same: getting and keeping a husband. Blodeuedd was created specifically to be a wife but the same could be said of any noblewoman of the period. What she lacked was the upbringing and training for the role. Could her failure as a wife be ascribed to her lack of training? Was the absence of this a direct result of her creation by men, who lacked the necessary skills and knowledge to pass on? She could be equated (in part) with Eve. Both were created and both transgressed against their creator.

Motherhood is not portrayed in a particularly positive light in the Four Branches. Rhiannon does not conceive for three years and once she has produced a son it is merely the start of punishment and sorrow for her. Even when Pryderi is a full-grown adult in the Third Branch, Rhiannon's concern for him leads to her being held captive with him in the magical fort of Llwyd. Branwen's son is murdered by her half-brother, a contributory factor in her

---

[46] Power, p. 70.

death from a broken heart and Aranrhod denies both of her sons and views them as a source of shame and strife with her kin. Even pregnancy has its problems as it is due to her cumbersome size and slowness that Llwyd ap Cil Coed's wife is captured in her mouse form by Manawydan and nearly hanged.

One of the popular tropes of modern views of the medieval period is that of courtly love and the chivalric code. It is doubtful whether this was observed in medieval Wales in the same way as it was in England and Power felt that the entire concept probably had more influence on men and women of later ages than it did on medieval life.[47] It is still of interest, however, to look at how many of the male characters in the Four Branches can be identified as knights and whether their behaviour adheres to what we know of the chivalric code. Pwyll's engagement in combat with Hafgan as part of quest to win Arawn's friendship certainly fits with the idea of a knightly code, as does his determined and chaste pursuit of Rhiannon, which at least one commentator has suggested is the equivalent of the trials undertaken in some medieval romances.[48] Gronw's desire for Blodeuedd caused him to break the chivalric code and stray from his (idealised) role as a knight, however, the blame for this is placed firmly on Blodeuedd by the author.

---

[47] Power, p. 20.
[48] ibid., p. 19.

THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S EMOTIONS

In her introduction to the volume of essays she edited, on the representation of women's emotions, Lisa Perfetti recounts those attributes that make up the stereotypical view of women that has perpetuated for centuries. She lists emotional instability, moodiness, unpredictability, being prone to emotional outbursts, and being an overall cause of social upheaval.[49] It is interesting to note how few of these attributes are evident in the female characters portrayed in the Four Branches. This could be because the author or redactor was either lacking in empathy towards the characters, or simply felt that, as women, their emotions were not worthy of a fuller depiction. That there are some emotions displayed by the female characters however, might give rise to another suggestion: that the author is deliberately manipulating the perception of their audience with regard to female emotions. As Perfetti notes, any texts written several hundred years ago will tell us less about actual emotions and more about the emotional conventions and standards of the time.[50] They can give us insights into whether women were encouraged (allowed?) to express emotions such as anger or grief. It is necessary to remember that we are probably considering a work that was almost certainly not authored by a woman, in which case we are looking at emotions described by a man. Why would the author feel the need to regulate women's emotional behaviour? It has been suggested that one of the key functions of emotions is as indicators of communal identity.[51] They can help

---

[49] Lisa Perfetti, *The Representation of Women's Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), p. 1.
[50] Perfetti, p. 2.
[51] ibid., p. 4.

an individual to adapt to prevailing social conditions and feel a sense of belonging to a community defined by certain shared standards of behaviour. There is a significant difference between the medieval and modern perception of emotions. We view them now as highly personal, an expression of our inner feelings, which helps to define us as individuals. In the medieval period the opposite was true. Emotions and feelings were oriented outwards and defined an individual's relationship to a community.[52] Miller has described emotions functioning as a "social state", positioning a person relative to others and producing certain social outcomes.[53] Paxson has further noted the difficulty of separating emotions such as love, fear or happiness from behavioural states like chastity.[54]

It can be seen that the emotions portrayed in the Four Branches are gendered. Where similar emotions are felt, they are represented very differently. Efnysien's anger at not being consulted regarding his sister's marriage is hot and violent but relatively quickly extinguished. By contrast, Aranrhod's fury at her public shaming by her brother is longer-lasting, smouldering on, with serious consequences for those it touches, even tangentially, such as Gronw. Kristi Gourlay has discussed how this difference may have its roots in the belief that women and men had different constitutions.[55] Men, with their hot and dry constitution, would commit a crime in a moment of heated anger. Conversely, women's constitution was cold and wet so any crime they committed was more likely to be

---

[52] Perfetti, p. 8.
[53] ibid., p. 9.
[54] ibid., p. 9.
[55] ibid., p. 5.

premeditated. This had important consequences for women's legal status as society made a distinction between man's temporary loss of reason and woman's perpetually irrational state.[56]

Valerie Allen has identified another way in which an identical resultant emotion, shame, differs between men and women. Men's shame can arise from a broad range of behaviours, mostly related to social estate, whereas women's shame is almost exclusively sexual in nature.[57] In this, shame is possibly the most social of emotions, involving as it can, an individual's entire community in matters that seem intensely personal to the modern reader. It has been suggested that the association between shame and sexuality meant that women, who were felt to be naturally more prone to shameful acts and thoughts, needed men to control them and monitor their behaviour.[58]

Contrast the shame felt by Efnysien or Matholwch with that of Aranrhod or Branwen. The former felt themselves to be shamed in the eyes of their communities because of their own actions or because they had not been accorded the respect they felt was due to them because of their position in society. When necessary, they brought the perceived insults to the attention of others. Conversely, the women were shamed as individuals by their communities for acts which were either committed by others or for not conforming to society's expectations of them. Aranrhod's shame at having

---

[56] Perfetti, p. 5.
[57] ibid., p. 5.
[58] ibid., p. 11.

been sexually active outside of marriage finds an odd mirror-image in Branwen's being cast out of her marital bed.

Different ranks of society held different expectations of the degree to which women should express emotion. Perfetti states that in medieval texts noblewomen are more likely to be represented as rational and emotionally stable than women from the lower ranks of society.[59] Does this explain, perhaps, why both Rhiannon and Branwen are portrayed as accepting their punishments without any great display of emotion? Despite women of noble birth being discouraged from exhibiting volatile emotions seen as unbecoming to their noble station, there were some situations where a woman's anger might be viewed more sympathetically, such as if she was being forced to marry someone of a lower social station against her will, as might perhaps be the case with Rhiannon and Gwawl. That episode presents Rhiannon as the person calmly controlling the situation and portrays her anger when Pwyll upsets her plans as justified. Another time when a woman's anger might be viewed by society as positive would be if the emotion was provoked by a loss of chastity. Once again, Aranrhod defies convention, showing only anger at her shame resulting from exposure rather than at the loss of her virginity. Echoing the Welsh law codes again, it is Aranrhod's male relatives who should have been allowed to act on the initial transgression. To deny them this opportunity to act would have been seen as a direct affront to their male authority and, consequently, a threat to social harmony. Another emotion that is treated very differently for women and men in the Four Branches is grief. Branwen's grief (at a situation that was not of

---

[59] Perfetti, p. 7.

her making) is shown to be so all-consuming that she simply falls down dead. The grief experienced by Bendigeidfran's male companions after his death is instead portrayed as a bonding moment and one which allows them to experience their emotion as a group.

There are several examples of close, non-familial relationships in the Four Branches. Pwyll and Arawn form a lifelong friendship as a result of the former's successful help in the defeat of Hafgan and his chaste conduct towards Arawn's wife. Bedigeidfran has a group of men who, although they are subordinate to his position as king, are also portrayed as his friends. However, the corresponding female relationships are conspicuous by their absence. In fact, the female characters exist almost in a void within the predominantly male world. Rhiannon is apparently motherless and has no female friends of her own. Even once she is married to Pwyll there is no mention of any female acquaintance or contact with other women until she gives birth to her son. The actions of the serving women following the abduction of Pryderi show that Rhiannon has inspired no loyalty in her female servants. This contrasts strongly with Goewin's situation where her maidens had to be forcibly removed from her side as they tried to defend her. This gap where female familial interactions are concerned is important since this would have been the route by which many of the traditional female skills were passed on, with older women acting as teachers or role models for the younger members of their social group.

THE FEMALE CHARACTERS AND MEDIEVAL WELSH LAW

It is possible to consider the Four Branches of the Mabinogi in the light of the information they can provide about the Welsh laws governing particular aspects of women's lives. Although the laws themselves are not referred to explicitly, references to rights which have been violated or recompense which is offered or sought can provide insights into the degree to which the legal codes of the time were followed. Medieval Wales has been described as a customary society, that is, that its laws were based on the customs or usual practices associated with that society. It has been suggested that in a society such as this, where the political environment is both fragmented and fragile and the framework of government is weak, that the people are most respectful of the law.[60] It helps to ensure protection against social chaos and provides 'an etiquette of precedence and propriety' that instructs all levels of the society in how to behave honourably towards each other.[61] Due to the close relationship between the legal codes and the customs and practices of Welsh society, it is reasonable to expect to find evidence for the laws in literary works of the period such as the Four Branches. The Law of Women is found as a separate tractate within the much larger texts of the Welsh laws and is mainly concerned with how the status of women could affect legal concepts such as inheritance and compensation. One constant is the use of the woman's marital or sexual status to determine the outcome of a given situation.

---

[60] R.R. Davies, *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063-1415* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 133.
[61] ibid., p. 116.

One perception that can be drawn is that a wronged woman cannot speak up for herself but must instead wait, or manipulate a situation, until someone male notices. This raises the entire issue of women's participation in the legal process in medieval Wales and it is possible to consider this with regard to the stories of the Mabinogi. Valente has noted that the rights of the women in the Four Branches are most often highlighted by the women themselves. She points out that when they feel they have been violated or victimised they raise verbal complaints and accuse their transgressors.[62] For example, Goewin denounces Gwydion and Gilfaethwy to their uncle immediately on his return, and Branwen trains a bird to be her voice (a *tauodyauc* or "tongue to speak for her") in raising her complaint with Bendigeidfran. In both cases, the women make their accusations to a man who has social and legal responsibility to them, rather than to their community. Their interaction with the law is thence at an end, apart from receipt of any compensation, since women were specifically banned from acting as witnesses in relation to men.

There are two main areas of medieval Welsh law that can be observed in the Four Branches. The first is that governing male-female relationships, both formal and informal. Valente has characterised these as "marriage, feuds and friendships".[63] To consider the first of these, of the nine types of lawful union that can be identified in Welsh law, Charles-Edwards has categorised them as follows:

---

[62] Valente, p. 123.
[63] ibid., p. 116.

- Unions by gift of kin

- Unions not by gift of kin, but with the consent of the kin and of the woman herself

- Unions to which the woman's kin do not consent, but to which the woman herself does

- Unions to which neither the woman nor her kin consent[64]

Of the many male-female unions portrayed in the Four Branches, several of them, such as that between Arawn or Teyrnon and their wives, or Pryderi and Cigfa, do not provide enough information to allow us to decide into which category they fall. By far the most common type of union is that by gift of kin, known as *priodas*, accounting as it does for Rhiannon and Gwawl, Branwen and Matholwch, and Rhiannon and Manawydan. This may be a reflection of the position of the characters of the Four Branches in the higher echelons of medieval Welsh society since, in the second and third cases at least, there is a diplomatic element to the union that was possibly less common lower down the social scale. The presence of Rhiannon's father at the feast to celebrate her marriage with Pwyll can be taken as tacit consent by her kin to the union and shows that it falls into the second of Charles-Edwards' categories. Math's offer of marriage to Goewin fits ostensibly into the third category due to the lack of any suggestion of consent from her kin but lacks the essentially secret nature of such unions noted by Charles-Edwards.[65] The final legally-recognised male-female union is the rape of Goewin by Gilfaethwy in the Fourth Branch. Charles-Edwards notes that the types of unions may be

---

[64] Charles-Edwards, p. 39.
[65] ibid., p. 40.

graded along a line, from the most honourable at one end to the least honourable at the other. He sees the evolution of the concept of *priodas* being recognised as the truest type of lawful marriage developing throughout thirteenth century Wales, something which the tales of the Mabinogi seem to reflect. Of the types of union which can reliably be sorted into the different categories only one, that of Rhiannon and Pwyll, can truly be said to require the consent of the woman. Furthermore, as Valente notes, the consummation of their marriage only takes place once Rhiannon is content that Pwyll has shown due appreciation of her powers.[66] The Welsh law codes can be interpreted as having a view of marriage which is based on a degree of equality and enjoyment and this is generally reflected in the tales of the Four Branches. Arawn's wife, Rhiannon, Teyrnon's wife and Cigfa seem at least content in their unions, with Rhiannon and Teyrnon's wife exhibiting a degree of equality with their husbands in discourse and decision-making. There is also a sense of acceptance on the part of the women in most of the cases, with the exception of that of Rhiannon and Gwawl.

Outside of marriage or sexual unions, women's place within kinship groups was also a consideration of Welsh law. Of all the members of medieval Welsh society, women must have been the most personally conflicted with regard to loyalty and the interests of their kin, and the Four Branches contain several examples of the responsibilities of both birth families and families by marriage towards women, as well as the conflicting loyalties experienced by married women. This dual loyalty could bring certain benefits and Owen has claimed Branwen as the most explicit representation in Welsh literature of

---

[66] Valente, p. 128.

the wife as a link between two kins, a "peace weaver", although in this instance an ultimately unsuccessful one.[67]

Valente has defined 'unnatural' relationships as those where one of the pair is forced into the assumption of a role, or actions which are inappropriate and which lie outside of the established social codes and obligations.[68] One such relationship is suggested by Beresford-Ellis, who has posited that the reason Gwydion is so quick to take responsibility for Aranrhod's sons is because he is their father and they are the offspring of an incestuous relationship between brother and sister.[69] Another relationship contained within the Four Branches that lies outside the orbit of the Welsh law codes is that of Cigfa and Manawydan. Cigfa shows fear that she will be violated by Manawydan who, as step-father-in-law to Cigfa, has no automatic responsibility for her. However, he is still bound by the social codes relating to his conduct towards another man's wife.

Once a woman has been widowed, the Welsh Law of Women is quite specific about her rights. The only widow in the Four Branches is Rhiannon. No mention is made of any separate household for her but rather it is implied that she is dependent on Pryderi. He alone makes the decision to have her remarry, only informing her of his choice later.

The second area of medieval Welsh law for which evidence can be sought in the Four Branches is that surrounding insult or injury, and recompense. The laws had a clearly defined structure which laid out payments to be made

---

67 Owen, p. 65.
68 Valente, p. 119.
69 Beresford Ellis, p. 61.

whenever an insult had been made, or shame brought upon an individual or their kin group. That the position of women in medieval society was perceived as inferior to the men can be evidenced by the fact that many of the female characters in the Mabinogi are never known by their own name but instead are referred to as appendages of their male relatives, for example, Arawn's wife or Teyrnon's wife in the First Branch or Llwyd ap Cil Coed's wife in the Third Branch. Ultimately, a woman's status was derived from her close male relatives. In a society where women were barred from inheriting land, they became reduced to merely the vessels by which the next generation of males could be produced. As with all hereditary systems, a desire to avoid uncertainty in the area of paternity resulted in the very heavy emphasis placed on virginity and female faithfulness within marriage. Medieval Welsh society experienced none of the modern embarrassment or prudishness when considering the sexual activity of prospective or actual marriage partners. There are several instances in the Law of Women where compensation or fines are payable due to some change in the sexual status of a woman. She was expected to remain a virgin until the time of her marriage and it was the responsibility of her family to ensure that this was the case. This may explain why Gwydion was so quick to take responsibility for his sister's sons. The suggestion by Beresford Ellis that he is their father, by way of an incestuous relationship, is rather fanciful and not supported by the text.

A fine called *amobr* was payable by a woman's family to their lord upon the loss of her virginity but there are no references to this type of payment in the Four Branches for the loss of virginity resulting from formal unions. Since

Welsh law did not allow women to inherit land, Cartwright has pointed out that a woman's body, and her assumed purity and fertility, were her most important contribution to any contract of marriage. Consequently, virginity carried a higher importance in medieval Welsh society than it did in a society which allowed women to inherit in the absence of male heirs.[70] Both Aranrhod's and Goewin's losses of virginity then were offences against the entire society in which they lived.

The Law of Women contains a section relating to rape, which it views as an offence both against the victim and her kin. The woman has the legal right to have her attacker formally charged, although the mechanism for doing so seems potentially upsetting for the victim from a modern point of view. The fines that are payable if a man admits or is found guilty of rape are different depending on whether the woman was a virgin or not. Because of the values of medieval Welsh society, it is to be expected that virginity was viewed as a commodity and that compensation would be exacted for the devaluation of the 'goods'.

This is borne out by the episode wherein Goewin accuses Gwydion and Gilfaethwy of rape. Math tells her that he will first arrange recompense for her and then for himself. It is telling that the emphasis is put on recompense to the woman taking priority. His subsequent offer of marriage may be to emphasise the higher level of redress required if the victim were a virgin. Alternatively, it may be a means to control the destiny of any child that might

---

[70] Cartwright, p. 64.

have been conceived, since Gilfaethwy is his nephew and therefore a member of his close kinship group.

As well as the payment of *amobr* to her lord, a woman herself was entitled to a *cowyll*, or 'morning gift', from her husband for the loss of her virginity. This was just one of several payments that were specifically made to the woman rather than to her husband or male relatives. Her *egweddi* was strictly speaking the moveable goods that she brought to the marriage, although it was regularly made as a monetary payment.[71] Interestingly, these payments were only due if the woman was given in marriage by her family; if she married without their knowledge they did not have to pay either *amobr* or *egweddi*. The Four Branches features two weddings where the action of the story continues on the next morning and so might conceivably make mention of *cowyll*, but neither does. Rather, Rhiannon instructs Pwyll to make gifts to the musicians and anyone else who requests one. It could be interpreted that, instead of desiring a gift for herself, she would rather have the "gift" of a husband with a reputation for generosity. Whatever the truth, Pwyll immediately complies with her wishes.

One of the key principles of medieval Welsh law was the *sarhaed* or insult-fine. Depending on the situation, the *sarhaed* could be paid directly to the woman or to her husband. For example, if a wife behaved unchastely or was unfaithful then an insult was deemed to have been done to her husband and a fine had to be paid to him in public reparation and to restore his standing in society. Conversely, if a husband beat his wife then, except in certain

---

[71] D.B. Walters, 'The European Legal Context of the Welsh Law of Matrimonial Property', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, pp. 131–50 (p. 135).

circumstances, she was entitled to receive her *sarhaed*. Valente has noted that the wording used in Arawn's wife's speech when the deception is revealed to her evokes the legal concept when she talks about her *meuyl* or shame. The choice of word is key, since in Welsh law *meuyl* signifies an act of dishonour which necessitates a compensatory payment of *sarhaed*.[72] Arawn's wife is the only female character to speak up for herself and raise the issue of monetary recompense. Both Rhiannon and Branwen suffer their shame in silence.

Under Welsh law, a husband was apparently perfectly within his rights to punish his wife with violence if she was unfaithful to him. Lleu takes no action himself against either Blodeuedd or Gronw for their adultery. In his discussion on shame and reparation in the Welsh Law of Women, Owen cites the opinion of the lawyer Goronwy ap Moriddig that when the wife is a willing partner to adultery, the adulterer is under no obligation to pay the husband's *sarhaed* and that the onus for the payment lies entirely with the wife. Owen goes on to note that, in his opinion, it is hard to believe that the adulterer would not have been considered equally responsible.[73] This may, however, go some way towards explaining the overall tone of the episode with Blodeuedd and Gronw, in which the author portrays Gronw as weak and manipulated by Blodeuedd.

One question that arises when considering the Law of Women is to what degree does it (and indeed the whole body of Welsh law as recorded by medieval sources) reflect the actual practice within the land. Parts of it have

---

[72] Valente, p. 145.
[73] Owen, p. 60.

variously been described as 'burlesque' and 'sermonising' and it has been claimed that the influence of medieval Welsh prose literature can be identified across the body of the work.[74] Ultimately it is not really possible to take the laws at face value and to assume they are a faithful rendering of Welsh medieval custom. It is probably truer to say that they represent a form of literature, where both text and subtext would have had meaning for the medieval audience.

There exists a body of medieval work in which a major theme is directly attacking women by detailing their vices. This is not something which is apparent in the four surviving branches of the Mabinogi. The only female character to be punished as a direct consequence of her own behaviour, rather than as a result of the actions of others, is Blodeuedd. Even then, she is not portrayed as an evil woman but rather one who falls in love with a man other than her husband, who, it should not be forgotten, she had no choice in marrying. Gwydion vents his anger at her actions but, in contrast to his conversations with Aranrhod, does not attack her character. Her punishment at his hands is because of the shame she brought upon his foster son. However, it is certainly true that punishment is gendered within the Four Branches, particularly when looking at the way that offenders are treated. Efnysien's actions bring shame upon his kin and bring about a war in which great numbers are killed, yet he is allowed to redeem himself and die a heroic death. Similarly, although Gwydion is punished for his part in the rape of Goewin, he is later able to take on the role of Lleu and Dylan's saviour and stalwart defender of the former against his mother's intractable rage and

---

[74] Robin Chapman Stacey, 'Divorce, Medieval Welsh Style', *Speculum*, 77.4, 1107–27 (p. 1122).

unreasonableness. In the scene where he turns Blodeuedd into an owl for her betrayal, he is portrayed as the just avenger of his wronged foster son. By contrast, both Rhiannon and Branwen are punished in ways that demean their social status and, although both consequently released from their punishments, there is no great moment of redemption or redress for either character. In fact, for Branwen summoning help from her kin results in further bad fortune for her, resulting as it does in the deaths of her brothers and her son. With the exception of Branwen, in every case where a female character is punished in some way, whether it be overt or more subtle, it can be argued that it comes as a consequence of not showing the respect due to a male character. For example, Rhiannon is pert and outspoken with both of her husbands and suffers consequences each time. The fact that these consequences do not immediately follow on from the perceived offence does not mean that they are any less related. Aranrhod disrespects her male relatives by losing her virginity without their knowledge and by refusing to abide by their wishes regarding her son and so is publicly shamed and defeated in a battle of wills by Gwydion.

Aranrhod is never intended for nor shows any interest in marriage. Is her loss of virginity then merely an offence against her family and their reputation and status? Is this why there is no suggestion of disgrace and no proposed solution such as the offer of marriage made to Goewin? Welsh law allowed for women to live independently. There is no suggestion that she at any point claimed to be a virgin, rather it is assumed by others because of her unmarried status. The text does not imply that she knew why she had been summoned to Math's court. If she had, however, been claiming to still be a

virgin then she could have fallen foul of an area of medieval Welsh law dealing specifically with 'false virgins' or *twyllforwyn*. This was a serious enough offence that, if it occurred on her wedding night, the Welsh laws recommended that the woman be subjected to a ritual of public shaming and sexual humiliation.[75]

Women's sexuality was under the control of their male relatives. The 'use'of Arawn's wife was part of the deal made with Pwyll, her sexual activity being in the gift of her husband. There are several indications in the text that their marriage was at least amicable, if not overtly loving, yet it is without any hint of hesitation or regret that Arawn offers his wife sexually as part of the deal he makes with Pwyll. During the episode, she is represented as a temptation which the noble Pwyll resists. Any shame felt is hers alone, arising from the perceived insult she experiences when her 'husband' rejects her in the marriage bed. Owen has pointed out that being expelled from the marriage bed by her husband is one of the three shames of a wife and her kin, a punishment exacted on Branwen in the Second Branch.[76] In the latter case, the treatment of Branwen is used by the author very much to highlight the situation of bringing shame upon her kin rather than purely as an episode wherein the audience should feel sympathy for her as a person. As Arawn felt able to treat his wife as part of a transaction, likewise, Pryderi uses his mother, Rhiannon, as a 'reward' for Manawydan, granting her in marriage to his friend as thanks for his loyalty. It is also possible to view Pwyll's successful union with Rhiannon as a reward for his honourable behaviour

---

[75] Cartwright, p. 61.
[76] Owen, p. 66.

towards Arawn's wife. By contrast, Aranrhod is a woman who lives independently of male protection, the ruler of her own dominion, Caer Aranrhod. This means that when her sexual experience is revealed she is not formally punished as she is not answerable to any man, but also means that there is no male relative or lord to take her part in seeking compensation for her shameful humiliation.

CONCLUSION

The Four Branches discuss vastly complex issues of social conduct and Valente has suggested that women are most often betrayed or victimised when proper social codes are abandoned.[77] All four Branches contain examples of social codes and structures not being observed and the consequences of this, leading many scholars to conclude that the stories formed part of an informal "instruction manual" showing expected behaviours and acted as a warning to conform. It is not as simple though as adherence to social codes leading to a happy ending, while non-adherence leads to an unhappy fate. However, as Valente has argued, the recurring topic for the female characters is that of violation.[78] In most of the episodes a woman is manipulated by the male characters into a situation which goes against her wishes and her consent is never sought. The female characters of the Four Branches shoulder a high degree of blame for the tragic events which occur,

---

[77] Valente, p. 107.
[78] ibid., p. 243.

and all are punished in some way. Even the punishments received by the women are ones which have an effect on the social status of their male kin.

When considering the potential audience for the Four Branches it seems at first as though there is a simple choice between a series of binary options, e.g. male/female, English/Welsh etc. However, it soon becomes apparent that the reality is much more complex, since no one individual can be defined purely by a single characteristic and that the definition of the audience would actually comprise something more like a matrix, with each point within the matrix having a different experience and perception of the Four Branches to its neighbour. Looking at the list of qualities present in the text of the Mabinogi, it is possible to make an attempt to determine which were felt to be important to medieval society and which less so. The evaluation allows the qualities to be divided into those which are viewed positively and those which are represented as negative. The themes which are addressed in the tales include shame, guilt, consent, trust, insult, anger, retribution, vengeance, violation, manipulation, and control. That the Four Branches are in some way a series of moral instructions, emphasising the importance of adhering to established social codes, is an idea that is widely accepted and has been much discussed. What a close reading of the text can reveal, however, is that the warnings and admonishments they contain not to transgress against society's standards are not equally applied to both women and men. Whereas the male characters might commit crimes that demand redress in law, such as the rape of Goewin, the female characters are punished for what could be described as upsetting the social order or defying convention, and displaying behaviours or emotions that are not suitable for upper-class

women. Another way to look at the Four Branches is to see them as a manual for good male-female romantic or sexual relationships.[79] It may also be possible to further extend this purpose and see them as instructions telling medieval women (and men?) how they were expected to behave. One way of interpreting the episode with Pwyll and Arawn's wife is to view it as a pointed reminder about a woman's right to consent to any sexual act, while his interactions with Rhiannon show an acknowledgement that sometimes the consummation of a union may have been at the time of the woman's choosing.

The representations of female power in the Four Branches show that it was overwhelmingly subtle rather than the overt power wielded by the male characters. Much use is made of the power of silence and inaction, with the women finding alternatives to physical responses or actions. There are examples within the text of women's resourcefulness and influencing, and their manipulation of the male characters. The power of women's speech rather than their physical actions is a recurring theme in the Four Branches and Valente has said that the verbal acts of the female characters have nearly as much power and effect on the men towards whom they are directed as "a quick blow to a sensitive part of the anatomy".[80]

The idealisation of the female characters has the disadvantage of reducing the usefulness for the historian trying to consider how their treatment or actions might shed light on the perception of real women in medieval Wales.

---

[79] Valente, p. 117.
[80] ibid., p. 98.

However, it is still possible to view the characters as individuals and even detect, amid a more dominant narrative of women paying the price for transgressing against society's expectations of them, a degree of sympathy towards the female characters, particularly perhaps with regard to the situation that Blodeuedd finds herself in. It might be that the fate of Blodeuedd should not be taken merely at face value as a tale about treachery but that it might serve a deeper purpose as a warning not to take things for granted or to ignore the established social codes.

Certain assumptions have been made throughout this essay. For example, where there is no justification for or, reaction to, something that occurs in the text it has seemed reasonable to interpret this as meaning that the audience would accept the event or situation without question since it would be familiar or even commonplace to them. However, it may be more likely that they would accept all elements, both magical and non-magical, familiar and strange, purely because they were part of the story, in the same way that modern readers will accept the presence of a flying carpet in the work of a magical realist such as Marquez. We cannot truly know how willing a medieval audience was to suspend disbelief in order to be entertained. Another assumption is that the author or authors was in tune with the zeitgeist and that the tales enjoyed a certain degree of popularity, which would lend validity to the perceptions and ideas they contain. This is by no means certain and the author(s) may have been old-fashioned and out of touch with the prevailing ideas of the time. There is also the danger that a modern reader's recognition of the mythological aspects of some of the

characters could lead to the historical aspects of the Four Branches being overlooked.

Where there are marked differences between the perceptions derived from the text of the Mabinogi and other sources from medieval Wales, does this automatically mean that it is the former which is wrong? For example, the aspects of Welsh law that are apparent (or not) in the stories of the Mabinogi may give an indication of how pervasive and present in everyday life that law was. The lack of direct references to legal concepts such as *sarhaed* adds weight to the opinion of those who have argued that the legal codes were theoretical manuals, more relevant to lawyers' debates than to everyday life.

Women are major characters in all four of the stories and examples of outright misogyny are absent from the Four Branches, however it is inferred throughout. The author or redactor of the Mabinogi does not give the impression that they judge the characters of Aranrhod or Blodeuedd to be wrong or bad in the sense of the traditional storyteller's dichotomy and the audience might well have felt some empathy with, or sympathy for them. However, their actions are ultimately shown to be unacceptable for the well-ordered running of society and the overall perception of women in the Mabinogi has been described as putting them in the position of guardians of the social codes.[81] A woman in a dominant role, shunning the conventions of medieval Welsh life, such as Aranrhod, was seen as a threat to the natural hierarchy. However, it was possible for a woman to play a dominant role in society as long as she was at least seen to be conforming to the normal

---

[81] Beresford Ellis, p. 35.

paradigms, as in the case, perhaps, of Rhiannon. The women who challenge the established social order are invariably punished, however, Branwen fulfilled all that was expected of her by society and yet came to a tragic end. This might be explained by seeing her as almost entirely a stock character such as the "calumniated wife" but could also be interpreted as a recognition of the divided loyalties experienced by married women and a warning about what could happen if those loyalties were not balanced properly and the woman failed in her role of peacemaker.

The social standards both limited and protected women and the repercussions of the constraints and controls that society placed on the lives of women can be seen throughout the tales. Virginity, marriage, fidelity and fertility were all seen as communal issues affecting the whole of society rather than just the individuals concerned as we would view them today. For example, the Mabinogi highlights the different standards for women and men with regard to chastity and fidelity. Women's sexuality was shown to be under the control of their male relatives and any sexual transgression would involve their wider community in issues of punishment and recompense.

As Perfetti argues, the representation of women's emotions in medieval texts can indicate society's expectations of proper emotional expression. In turn, these expectations would have influenced how medieval women were directed to process their feelings amid the "complicated web of social norms and cultural values that define or give meaning to emotions".[82] Depictions of emotional volatility could be used as a reason to limit women's

---

[82] Perfetti, p. 2.

independence. The female audience members could have reflected on their own emotions and contemplated how they might have reacted had they found themselves in similar situations. There would have been no guarantee that anyone would modify their behaviour purely on the basis of watching a performance or reading a story, but the seeds of potential change could have been sown.

Can enough be drawn from the narrative of the Mabinogi to arrive at a view of whether the author or redactor viewed women in a generally positive or negative light? One point that can be observed, is that there is no overt judgemental tone to the texts. In fact, the overall authorial voice is rather sympathetic to the female characters at times. However, whoever the author or redactor of the Four Branches may have been, he was evidently both very aware of, and fearful of, the subtle power that could be wielded by women. The Four Branches have long been held up as examples of tales with strong female characters. However, as this essay argues, an alternative reading is that they are, partly at least, essentially misogynistic in character and fit into the canon of conduct literature directed specifically against women. There will be many who disagree with this interpretation of the stories but, to return to the initial definition discussed in the introduction, perception is a subjective opinion or belief. As such, no definitive answer can be reached and the debate will continue for many years to come.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Bonnie S., and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1990)

Beresford Ellis, Peter, *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature* (London: Constable, 1995)

Bernau, Anke, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih, eds., *Medieval Virginities* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003)

Bitel, Lisa M., *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Breeze, Andrew, *The Origins of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2009)

Burke, Peter, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992)

Byfield, Catherine E., 'Character and Conflict in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, XL (1993)

Caldecott, Moyra, *Women in Celtic Myth* (Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1992)

Cartwright, Jane, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose', in *Medieval Virginities* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003)

Cavell, Emma, 'Fouke Le Fitz Waryn: Literary Space for Real Women?', *Parergon*, 27 (2010)

Charles-Edwards, T.M., 'Nau Kynywedi Teithiauc', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, pp. 25–43

C.W. Sullivan III, *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015)

Davies, R.R., *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063-1415* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)

Davies, Sioned, 'Storytelling in Medieval Wales', *Oral Tradition*, 7 (1992)

———. , tran., *The Mabinogion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Davies, Wendy, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1989)

Finke, Laurie A., and Martin B. Shichtman, eds., *Medieval Texts & Contemporary Readers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987)

Hanawalt, Barbara A., 'Silences of the Middle Ages', *Journal of Women's History*, 5 (1994)

Jack, R. Ian, *Medieval Wales*, The Sources of History: Studies in the Uses of Historical Evidence (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972)

Kennedy, Ruth, and Simon Meecham-Jones, eds., *Authority and Subjugation in Writing of Medieval Wales* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008)

Lerner, Gerda, 'The Majority Finds Its Past', *Current History*, 70 (1976)

Luft, Diana, 'Review of "The Origin of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi"', *Beltaine*, 27 (2010)

Owen, Morfydd E., 'Shame and Reparation: Women's Place in the Kin', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, pp. 44–77

Owen, Morfydd E., and Dafydd Jenkins, eds., *The Welsh Law of Women: Studies Presented to Professor Daniel A. Binchy* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2017)

Perfetti, Lisa, *The Representation of Women's Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005)

Pfeffer, Wendy, 'Constant Sorrow: Emotions and the Women Trouvères', in *The Representation of Women's Emotions in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*

Power, Eileen, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

Richards, Gwyneth, *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009)

Roderick, A.J., ed., *Wales through the Ages Volume 1* (Swansea: Christopher Davies (Publishers) Ltd, 1975)

Scott, 'Women's History', in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992)

Sheehan, Sarah, 'Matrilineal Subjects: Ambiguity, Bodies and Metamorphosis in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi', *Signs*, 34 (2009)

Sims-Williams, Patrick, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Stacey, Robin Chapman, 'Divorce, Medieval Welsh Style', *Speculum*, 77, 1107–27

Valente, Roberta L., 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Boundaries of Gender in Math', *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, XXXV (1988)

———, '"Merched y Mabinogi": Women and the Thematic Structure of the Four Branches' (unpublished Ph.D., Cornell University, 1986)

Walters, D.B., 'The European Legal Context of the Welsh Law of Matrimonial Property', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, pp. 131–50

Winward, Fiona, 'Some Aspects of the Women in The Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 34 (1997)