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Women and marriage in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*

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ABSTRACT

'Women and Marriage in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi'* explores the experience of marriage as portrayed in the tales of the Four Branches, particularly from the perspective of the female characters.

It has frequently been suggested that in the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi,* the emphasis is on the importance of the stability of the social group – with marriage being an essential part of social order - and that where women and men abide by their roles and obligations, social chaos can be avoided. The thesis, keeping this in mind, takes into account issues such as kinship relationships, agency and independence and the effect of social expectations for the roles of married women, before and after marriage.

The thesis attempts to analyse the diverse features of the various marital relationships from the perceived experience of the women in each of the Four Branches. The analysis also takes into account medieval Welsh law – in particular the Welsh laws of women and the laws relating to *Sarhaed* (insult and honour) – along with contemporary scholarly research and opinion.

The thesis concludes by querying whether the fundamental gender inequalities inherent in medieval Welsh society inevitably meant that the experience of marriage for women was frequently one of subjection and diminishment, as depicted in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi.

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Introduction

Within the tales of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* are a variety of amazing and colourful female characters, whose speech and actions draw our attention, not only to them, as individuals, but also to the social context within which their interactions and relationships unfold. As Roberta Valente has written:

> The women of the Mabinogi – whose personalities range from the mysteriously elusive to the humourously practical – are among the most vivid characters in the world of the Four Branches…[1]

Valente also notes, particularly concerning the inter-relationships between men and women in the tales, that 'personal conduct, social codes and legal obligations make up the cross-threads from which the Four Branches are woven.'

The importance of the stability of the social group is emphasized throughout the Four Branches, as J.K. Bollard has said:

> The constant concern of the author of The Four Branches is the modes of personal conduct which are necessary for society to survive and progress.[2]

The background to these 'modes of personal conduct' and to the stories of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* are the Welsh medieval Law Codes, the Laws of Hywel Dda – and in particular, in terms of the women – The Welsh Law of Women, which contains rules governing various aspects of the lives of women. This includes rules around espousal and marriage – though it is clear that the 'marriage' of the medieval Welsh Law texts differed in various ways from marriage as we understand it today. As H.G. Wells once said:

> The marriage of today is not the marriage of yesterday and still less is it likely to be the marriage of tomorrow.[3]

So the tales of the Four Branches offer insights into the practice of marriage in medieval Wales. For example, it is interesting to note that in the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*

[1]Valente, R.L. *Merched y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of the Four Branches* Ph.D. Thesis, Cornell University, 1986, P. 283.
[2] Bollard, J.K., 'The Structure of the Four Branches of The Mabinogi' *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1974-5, P. 252.
[3] Wells H.G. *The World of William Clissold* (London:Ernest Benn Ltd, 1926) p. 126.

marriage for the female characters does not always have a positive impact upon their lives, at least in terms of power and independence. As Fiona Winward comments:

> The discrepancy in the individuality of married women by comparison with their unwedded counterparts is immediately obvious: three women are introduced into the tales who are already married; none of the three are given names but simply referred to as the wives of, respectively, Arawn, Terynon and Llwyd.[4]

So, why is it that marriage generally seems to have a negative impact upon the women of The Four Branches, in terms of their individuality, agency and independence?

This thesis will explore this central question by examining marriage, as portrayed by the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, considering the relationships of married women and their experiences as reflected within their stories.

Chapter one will consider the background to the development of marriage in the medieval era, its gradual 'Christianisation' and some of the resulting implications for women in marriage. This chapter will also look at *Cyfraith Hywel* (Laws of Hywel), especially the Welsh law of women which underpins the social context, particularly focusing on what the laws state concerning marriage and the rights of women. It will begin by introducing *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* in its medieval setting.

Chapter two will look at the First and Third Branches, focusing primarily on the character of Rhiannon, the only woman who appears in two Branches of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi,* comparing her status before and after marriage and her remarriage to Manawydan. It will also examine insights offered by the tales of the marriage of Teyrnon and his wife, the predicament of Cigfa after the disappearance of Pryderi and refer to the tale of the wife of Llwyd Cil Coed.

Chapter three will explore the Second Branch, specifically the marriage of Branwen to Matholwch and particularly the impact of *Sarhaed*, the Laws of kinship and honour.

Chapter Four will explore the Fourth Branch partciularly the marriage of Goewin and Math, insights from the tale of Aranrhod, the character of Blodeuedd and the implications for gender roles in terms of marriage and procreation.

[4] Winward, F.., 'The Women in the Four Branches' *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (1997), p. 89

Finally, the thesis will attempt to draw conclusions about the portrayals of marriage in the tales and the particular implications and impacts of marriage for the women of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, bearing in mind the question highlighted above.

CHAPTER ONE - Marriage, the Welsh Law of Women and *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi.*

Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi, four tales in Middle Welsh, are some of the earliest narrative prose texts preserved in Welsh. With regards to their period of composition scholars agree that the stories were written down sometime between the end of the 11th century and the 14th century. For example, Charles-Edwards suggests not earlier than 11th century or later than 1100. However, as Sioned Davies says in her introduction to her translation of *The Mabinogion:*

> Their roots lie in oral tradition, and they evolved over centuries before reaching their final written form; as such, they reflect a collaboration between the oral and literary culture, and give us an intriguing insight into the world of the traditional storyteller.[5]

Therefore, although *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* are later medieval literary texts, the tales contain elements which are considerably older and draw on a wide and rich variety of ancient stories, traditions, motifs, archetypes, themes and sources, some of which possibly pre-date the later influences of western Christianity. For example, many scholars have noted elements of pre-Christian fertility goddess myths and also the strong presence of magic and 'otherworldy' elements of earlier Celtic culture contained within the tales.

It is suggested by most scholars that, rather than being the work of a single author, the stories are a product of a collective or communal process over time. Several scholars have suggested a Christian clerical author because of his focus on ethical values.[6] For example, P. MacCana says:

> In his narrative and use of character…he subtly conveys a scale of values which, by implication, he commends to the practice of contemporary society…he projects the more Christian and more practical virtues of patience and compromise…[7]

Sioned Davies says:

> Throughout Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi…the author uses his characters to reinforce his ideas regarding proper social conduct. The virtues to be fostered are patience, modesty, wisdom, chastity, loyalty – these are the virtues that will ultimately win the day. [8]

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[5]Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. ix

[6] Professer Andrew Breeze is an exception as he argues for a female author, Gwenllian, due to the focus on female themes to do with child-bearing and child-rearing etc. See Breeze, A. *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin, 1997) pp. 74-79.

[7] MacCana, P. *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1977) p.60

[8] Davies, S. *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi. Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (Llandysul, 1993) p. 80

J.K. Bollard also notes that the Four Branches 'acquired a Christian gloss at the hands of their clerical redactor' and that 'the constant concern of the author of the Four Branches is the modes of personal conduct which are necessary for society to survive.'[9]
These modes of personal conduct are also undergirded by the medieval Welsh law-texts. For example, T.P. Ellis says, 'The early tales reproduce the proper local colouring of the law….The writer knew his law'[10] - and this also included the laws concerning marriage and the rights and duties for women. However, before proceeding to look in some detail at what the Welsh law-texts say regarding women and marriage, it may be useful to consider briefly the development of marriage as a social practice in the medieval period.

Firstly, we sometimes take it for granted that marriage is an integral experience of human life, governed by rules of state (and sometimes religion) – but why should it be? Answering that question from an anthropological perspective, as human beings have wanted to perpetuate their existence and to reproduce themselves – as all species do – so social civilisation has added layers of codes of behaviour, rules and regulations around the legitimacy of pairings and reproduction for a variety of reasons. For example, to ensure the stability of social structures and relationships, which in turn provides a safer and more secure environment for the survival of offspring. Gradually into this picture of social stability came other elements such as the individual roles of the married couple, the inheritance and sharing of wealth and property and rules around legitimacy, incest and divorce. Therefore, according to those who have studied the history and evolution of marriage, its origins are 'rooted in family, rather than family in marriage.'[11] The needs of nurture and kinship are primal in human society and out of these arose legally regulated forms of relationship which have evolved over the centuries, according to various influences.

However, the contemporary western view of marriage is a relatively new institution and there are those who would argue that, as it is largely the product of a patriarchal society, its benefits are weighed heavily in favour of the male half of the

[9] Bollard, J.K. 'The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1974-5 p. 252
[10] Ellis, T.P. 'Legal References, Terms and Conceptions in the Mabinogion' *Y Cymmrodor* 39 (1928), pp. 108 & 145.
[11] De Pomerai, R. *Marriage, Past, Present and Future* (London: Constable and Co. Ltd), 1930 p.viii. (Pomerai is quoting from the work of Professor E. Westermarck on the history of human marriage).

relationship. As the picture offered by Georges Duby of medieval marriage from the female perspective emphasises:

> A wife would be subject to her husband, whilst condemned always to remain a stranger, always a little under suspicion of secret betrayal in the bed to which she had gained admittance and where she was to fulfil her primary function, that of providing children to the group of men who received, dominated and kept watch over her.[12]

There are also those who argue that in pre-historic societies the status and role of women was considerably different, and indeed modern archaeology and anthropology is unveiling a variety of more positive findings regarding the status and power of women in many indigenous cultures.[13] In terms of Celtic societies, some also argue that remnants of such status and power are exemplified by practices and rites around the concept of the sovereignty goddess, essential for the fertility of the land, and evident in many Irish and Welsh mythological tales. We will consider further the 'fertility goddess' aspects later in this chapter.

Before we look in more detail at the texts of *Cyfraith Hywel,* two points need to be noted. Firstly, that the texts themselves are problematic in that they are drawn from widely differing periods and contexts. Secondly, as R.R. Davies comments:

> Between the neat, clear-cut theorems of the legal texts….and current social practice there may well be a considerable gulf. The Law-texts are concerned with the ideal and the static; they make few concessions to the untidiness of human activities or to the impact of social change.[14]

With these two reservations in mind, we now look at marriage, as outlined by *Cyfraith Hywel*.

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[12] Duby, G. *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages.* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994) pp. 7-8.
[13] See, for example, the work of Robert Briffault, *The Mothers: A Study of the Origins of Sentiments and Institutions*. Volumes 1-3 (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1927). Also Maria Gimbutas *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe.* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991). Also Conkey, M. and Spector, J. 'Archaeology and the Study of Gender', *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, Vol. 7 (1984) pp.1-38.
[14] *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980). P. 93

To begin with, early Welsh Law put great emphasis on the virginity of a prospective bride.[15] For example, if a girl was accused of being a *twyllforwyn*, a false virgin, she could be vindicated by her *cyfneseifiaid* (next of kin), but:

> If she does not wish to be vindicated, let her shift be cut off as high as her genitals and let a year-old steer with its tail greased be put into her hand. And if she can hold it, let her take it in place of her share of the *argyfrau* (her own personal possessions). And if she cannot hold it, let her have nothing.[16]

If this custom was ever practised in reality, it was surely an unbearable abuse and humiliation of a young women!

In early Welsh law marriage contracts were relatively clear-cut. At the betrothal the prospective bride's father paid an *amobr* (fee) to the feudal Lord.[17] After the first night (if she survived the trial of virginity) the husband paid the *cowyll* (morning gift), though the bride had to name the amount before rising from the bed, and if she forgot she forfeited exclusive rights to the *cowyll.* From then until the seventh year of marriage she was entitled to *agweddi* (woman's entitlement) from her husband if he deserted her – or if she legitimately left him. After seven years she was entitled to half of the marriage wealth and *agweddi* was no longer paid, as the law recognised the union as husband and wife. At this stage she was known as *gwraig briod* (women of property) so women – or at least free women of high rank – were not just commodities to be purchased, but women of property in their own right.

In terms of separation or divorce, a woman could separate from her husband legitimately by providing evidence of his adultery on 3 occasions (this must have been difficult!), or if her husband had leprosy, bad breath or was impotent. It was obviously of benefit to the woman to wait for the seven years to elapse so that she could be entitled to her half share of the marriage wealth, the division of which is described in great detail by the Laws.

Concerning marital violence and rape, in Welsh law rape is most serious in the case of a virgin. Otherwise the law of redress is really about the insult to the woman's

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[15] In the Irish legal texts virginity did not affect a girl's marriage prospects. Perhaps the widespread practice of fosterage in Ireland for both girls and boys from 7-14 would have made it more difficult to establish with certainty.

[16] *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980). P.9

[17] Note – the girl was legally entitled to accept or refuse betrothal – *Ibid*., p.122

husband or the king, as Lisa Bitel says: 'In the laws rape represented the stealing or damaging of one man's property by another.'[18] In terms of marital violence, a man was allowed to beat his wife for three reasons:

> For giving something which she is not entitled to give, for being found with a man, and for using insulting language to him.[19]

Thomas Charles-Edwards identifies in Welsh Medieval Law nine different possible types of marital union which he compares with the Irish Law Tract *Cáin Lánamna* (c. 700 A.D.), The Law of Coupling. The first is *priodas*, a union by gift of kin where the *argyfrau* is at least half the value of the husband's moveable goods. The second union is *agwedi*, also a marriage by gift of kin, in which the *argyfrau* is less than half the value of the husband's share of moveable goods. The third, *caradas*, is 'a union by which the woman stays at home.' The fourth union, *deu lysuab llathlud*, which Charles-Edwards admits 'remains something of an enigma.' The fifth union is *llathlut goleu*, open elopement. The sixth union is *llathlut twill*, secret elopement. The seventh union is *beichogi twill gwreic lwyn a pherth*, a secret union where the woman continues to live at home. The eighth union is *kynnywedi ar liw ac ar oleu*, the abduction of a woman by force, and the ninth union is *twill morwyn*, 'by deception of a virgin' – rape![20] Such a list of nine different approaches to medieval marriage indicates the widely varied experiences of medieval women in everyday life with regards to relationships and marriage practices – from *gwraig briod*, the woman of property, to *twill morwyn* the humiliation and violent abuse of rape.

At this point only the law-texts connected with betrothal and marriage have been considered, but, particularly in chapter four of this thesis, we will also take into account rules around *Sarhaed*, kinship and honour, which are central to the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*.

It is clear, therefore, that women in medieval society, even under the law of *Cyfraith Hywel,* were far from being free or independent. In addition, in the later medieval period the increasing influence of Christian teaching regarding the practice of marriage also impacted upon the independence and autonomy of women.

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[18] Bitel, L. *Land of Women* (Cornell University Press, 1996) p. 225.

[19] *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) p. 51

[20] Charles-Edwards, T.M. Nau Kynywedi Teithiauc in *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) pp. 35-36.

Two particular aspects of underlying Christian theological ideas which directly affected the status of women and the practice of marriage are useful to note. Firstly, the effect upon women of the Christian doctrine of Original Sin and, secondly, the writings of St Paul regarding marriage.

Reflecting on the first of these aspects, the early Church Father, Tertullian, Bishop of Carthage in the second century, referring to the Genesis myth of the Fall in the Garden of Eden, addressed female Christians as follows:

> You are the devil's gateway. You are the unsealer of that forbidden tree…..you destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your dessert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die…21

The early Church Fathers taught that original sin was transmitted through the sexual act, which Augustine calls 'carnal concupiscence' and goes on to say that 'whatever progeny was born….would drag through the ages the burden of original sin.'[22]

As a result, as Karen Armstrong comments:

> Childbearing, which in other cultures is a woman's chief pride and source of what power she has, has been tainted with evil; it is the means whereby sin is transmitted.23

Secondly, the writings of St. Paul also relegated marriage to second best – or lower. In his first Epistle to the Corinthians he says:

> It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman; but since sex is always a danger, let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband.24

Paul says that celibacy is best because it leaves a person free to serve God – to follow the holiest calling. As a result the energy and focus of Christianity was on virginity, celibacy and continence, with marriage being a very poor second best. In place of sinful Eve, the Church raised up a new female ideal in the Blessed Virgin Mary. As the sinless Virgin and mother (spouse of the Divine) she became the Church's ideal of the pure and perfect and woman.

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[21] Tertullian, *The Writings: On Female Dress* (Edinburgh, 1870)Volume 1:I As quoted by Armsrong, K. *The Gospel According to Woman* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1986)p. 55

[22] Augustine of Hippo Enchiridion, 26, 27 as quoted by K. Armstrong, *Ibid.,* p. 32.

[23] Armstrong, K. *The Gospel According to Woman* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1986) p. 33

[24] The Holy Bible N.R.S.V. (Oxord University Press, 1995) I Corinthians 7:1-2. P. 166

However, for ordinary women Mary was an impossible ideal for, as Jane Cartwright comments, 'She alone was both a mother and a virgin.'[25]

This view of women was supplemented by Greek philosophical notions about biology and reproduction, which allocated a merely passive role for women as the 'vessel' in which the child developed. In addition, women's contribution to the process was less 'pure', as Aristotle wrote in *De Generatione Animalium* that man contributed the **form** of humanity through his semen, but the woman contributed only **brute matter**, a substance less pure and less sanctified than semen itself.[26]

So to this view sex became an enemy of purity and marriage was a second class option because it only passed on the virus of original sin. The only way back to purity was through celibacy. But for women, whose very bodies are a constant reminder of nature's rhythms of fertility and creativity, the path of virginity became a path of self-repulsion, self-negation and even annihilation - as can be illustrated by the extreme violence in many of the stories of the lives of women saints of the Middle Ages. As Karen Armstrong says, 'their bodies, far from being revered, were the obstacles to transcendence and must be brought into subjection. '[27]

In fact many of the leading Christian Fathers pondered over the question of whether women had souls and commented on the utter pointlessness of women, who were useful only for procreation, but for nothing else.[28]

So Christianity relegated marriage to a lower status and by directly associating sin with sex, the bodies of women, the 'perpetrators' of fertility – were also relegated to the 'unclean.'

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[25] Cartwright, J. *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008) p. 8

[26] For example, Aristotle believed that all semen was male and so it was logical to suppose that every embryo would become a male infant. So, according to Aristotle, the norm is male and the female is defective. Thomas Aquinas, picking up on Aristotelian biology says: '*As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sect; while the production of woman comes from a defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence.'* (T. Aquinas 'Summa Theologica' IV, Part one. *Quaest*, XCII, art. 1,2 as quoted by K. Armstrong, *Ibid* p. 62).

[27] *Ibid.,* P. 169

[28] Augustine of Hippo – 'I fail to see what use woman can be to man, if one excludes the function of bearing children..' De Genesi ad Litteram, 9, 5-9.

In the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, elements of the denigration of women within marriage are clearly present. For example, there are stories of abuse, violence, unjust accusations, calumniated wives and of women disregarded and treated as property to be traded. Yet it has to be said that there are also stories of strong and ingenious women, who shrewdly work within the limitations of patriarchal power to achieve their own aspirations and ambitions.

As we consider some of the stories of the married women of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, we will explore the effect of marriage in the lives of medieval women, also keeping in mind aspects of the tales which may be rooted in an older oral tradition. For example, as previously mentioned, the fertility myth of the Sovereignty Goddess, of which several scholars have noted vestiges in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*.[29] In mythology this legend may have represented a life-affirming rite of sacred marriage, the sexual union of male and female, elevating the sacred power of fertility, both human and in the natural world.

There are those who have questioned the usefulness of sovereignty goddess references in terms of the Mabinogi women,[30]and others who have argued that such a mythology does not necessarily equate with an elevated position of women in real life.[31] However, it could also be argued that the colossal psychological and philosophical shift in the underlying social myth – from fertility goddess to the Blessed Virgin Mary – may have had a negative social effect on perceptions of the feminine.

As Berresford Ellis comments:

> The Roman image of Mary turned into a positive barrier to feminine fulfilment: women were forced to stifle their sexuality and their independence, and become simply slaves to men. Mary was no longer the mother goddess but a passive, eternally suffering vehicle through which the male God could enter the world.[32]

Because of this negative view of marriage in the first centuries of Christianity, no special rite was devised to celebrate Christian marriage nor did a priest need to be present even into medieval times. The practice was, as laid out in the laws of *Hywel Dda*, betrothal,

[29] For example, MacCana, P. *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1977) pp. 57-8
[30] For example see Valente's first chapter on 'The Limitations of the Sovereignty Motif' – Valente, R.L. *Merched y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of the Four Branches* Ph.D. Thesis, Cornell University, 1986.
[31] Green, M. *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*. (London: British Museum Press, 1995).p. 15
[32] Berresford Ellis, P. *Celtic Women* (London: Constable and Co Ltd., 1995) p. 39.

a public demonstration of intention and consummation, but with no requirement for a church blessing.

According to the evidence of the Court Rolls there were issues around laws in relation to illegitimacy, divorce and inheritance entitlements, however, as D.B. Walters comments, 'the Welsh laws are almost silent as to any ecclesiastical influence on marriage.' [33] Nevertheless R. R. Davies explains this discrepancy between the evidence of the law-texts and the Court Rolls regarding marriage practice as follows:

> The former, in essence if not in their surviving manuscript form, largely pre-date the articulation of the Church's teaching and the growing acceptance of the jurisdiction of its courts; the latter belong to a period during which Welsh custom was being increasingly subsumed within the Church's law and teaching on marriage.[34]

So the Court Rolls record the gradual acceptance of Canon Law in relation to marriage, whereas the Laws of *Hywel* are secular in essence.

For the purposes of this thesis it seems sufficient, in conclusion, to note some examples of aspects with which the church took issue with the medieval law-texts.

Firstly, marriage was still regarded as a contract and not a sacrament, so that a divorce was the termination of a contract and not the annulment of a sacrament. Secondly, because marital unions could be concluded and dissolved easily, those involved often had children by more than one union (indeed polygamy was still practised in both Wales and Ireland in medieval times, as in the Old Testament where men had wives and concubines). In terms of inheritance, all children (though usually male) were regarded as equal. As R. R. Davies comments:

> The practice of *cynnwys* as it appears in late-medieval court rolls and extents accepted that sons born out of wedlock could be avowed by their fathers as their own and thereby admitted as rightful heirs to their fathers' lands….[an]essentially permissive and compassionate attitude…[35]

However, in contrast, Christianity helped to create the status of illegitimacy, as Mary Condren comments:

> Under the patrilineal system "illegitimacy" became a reality. Should a woman conceive a child outside wedlock, though concubinage, rape or an extramarital affair…….The child had no inheritance rights, would not automatically belong to any lineage….If a father was to take

[33] *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) p. 121
[34] *Ibid.,* p. 98
[35] *Ibid.,* p. 107

> responsibility for raising a child and the child would in turn inherit the father's property, the father would make every effort to ensure that he was, in fact, the biological father. The only way he could do this was to control the sexual behaviour of his wife.[36]

These, then, are some of the issues which set the general background to the practice of marriage in the medieval period and in particular within the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*.

In the following chapters we will look at each of the Four Branches with particular reference to what the stories reveal concerning marriage, keeping in mind the question: why is it that, in general, marriage seems to have a negative impact upon the married women of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*? Or, as Fiona Winward expresses it – 'the gradual degeneration of the women's independence as they progress through the various life stages.'[37]

[36] Condren, M. *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1989).pp. 85-86

[37] Winward, F. 'Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* Vol 34: (1997), p. 82

Chapter 2 – Marriage in the First and Third Branches.

This chapter will look primarily at the marriages of Rhiannon, firstly to Pwyll in the First Branch and secondly, to Manawydan in The Third Branch, with reference also to the marriages of Teyrnon and his unnamed wife, Pryderi and Cigfa and finally of Llwyd Cil Coed and his unnamed wife. The focus on the women's experience will explore particularly how marriage impacts upon the lives of women through the various 'stages' of women's lives and also the possible challenges for women in acquiescing to the social rules.

Rhiannon enters the First Branch as a shining character of impressive mystery and power – 'a woman wearing a shining golden garment of brocaded silk on a big, tall, pale-white horse coming along the highway that ran past the mound.'[38]

Some of her first recorded words indicate a person of self-determination ('Going about my business'[39]) and self-confidence ('I am glad to see you.'[40]). As Fiona Winward says:

> [Rhiannon] enters into the established worldly setting as if through a portal from the Otherworld….she is a *marchoges*, horsewoman, and…the only women in *The Four Branches* to be seen in an activity otherwise undertaken only by men.[41]

In fact in many respects Rhiannon is unique amongst the women of *Peder Keinc y Mabinogi* in that she chooses her own husband, is consulted for her assent in the match with her second husband, is the only women who marries twice, the only female to appear in more than one Branch and also has more recorded speech than any other female character.

W.J. Gruffydd describes the tale of the meeting of Pwyll and Rhiannon as belonging to the motif tradition of 'how a mortal man meets an Other-worldly woman…how she imposes her own conditions upon him, and how they are married and have children.'[42]

Certainly in Branch One Rhiannon's story has characteristics consonant with the Celtic Otherworld. For example, she first appears as Pwyll and his men sit on the mound of Gorsedd Arberth, representing one of the sacred 'portals' to the Otherworld, and her horse which cannot be overtaken suggests that she and her horse are not bound by natural laws.

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[38] Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 8.
[39] *Ibid*., p.10
[40] *Ibid.,* p. 10
[41] Winward, F. 'The Women in the Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (1997), p.83
[42] Gruffydd, W.J. *Rhiannon: An Inquiry into the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1953) p. 49.

In terms of her named identity, Sioned Davies comments, 'Her name derives from that of the Celtic Goddess Rigantona ('the great or Divine Queen').[43]

W.J. Gruffydd says:

> Rhiannon is no mere figure of fairy folk-lore, but the survival of an immemorial myth in which she was the Great Mother who became identified with the Great Horse Goddess, Epona.[44]

Many scholars have indicated the links between the character of Rhiannon and horses. For example, she first appears riding on a horse, her punishment is to sit by a mounting block and carry visitors on her back, the link between Rhiannon's baby and Teyrnon's foal and the ass's collar placed on her neck in the Third Branch. As Jessica Hemming comments:

> There is considerable evidence that Celtic sovereignty goddesses, both continental and insular, typically existed in the dual aspect of woman and mare. Rhiannon would therefore seem to be comprehensible as a literary reworking of the equine sovereignty goddess of Dyfed.[45]

So it could be argued that it is Rhiannon's sovereignty goddess status which enables her independence, wit and agency above the other female characters of *Peder Keinc y Mabinogi.* However, R.L. Valente critiques the scholarly approach which 'insists on reducing the female characters in The Mabinogi to those which can be identified as euhemenised goddesses and those which cannot.'[46] Certainly the tales of *Peder Keinc y Mabinogi* contain the stories of women who are portrayed in every way to be as human as the rest of us – in terms of their emotions, choices and responses to their particular life challenges. Valente also notes a particular element of their humanity, namely their requirement – along with everyone else – to be subject to the codified rules of the social group, as in *Peder Keinc y Mabinogi* 'conflict arises from attempts to bend or break the rules.'[47]

Rhiannon's betrothal to Pwyll certainly veers from the usual social conventions (which are noted in chapter one of this thesis). She blatantly admits that she has rejected her father's chosen suitor, Gwawl 'and I still do not want him, unless you reject

[43] Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 230
[44] Gruffydd, W.J. *Rhiannon: An Inquiry into the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi* (Cradiff, 1953) P. 67
[45] Hemming, J. 'Reflections on Rhiannon and the Horse Episodes in Pwyll' in *Western Folklore*; Chico 57:1 (Winter 1998) p. 19
[46] *Ibid.,* p. 70. For example, Valente refers to the work of W.J. Gruffydd, Pronsias MacCana and Catherine McKenna.
[47] *Ibid.,* p. 89.

me'[48] - she's keeping her options open, but she knows what she wants, and she's going for it! In comparison Pwyll seems almost weak and submissive as he fails to keep up with her (in more ways than one), and is then later forced to accept her commands and advice due to his own incompetence and wavering uncertainty. Winward notes Rhiannon's impatience as she attempts to work within the limitations of the patriarchal system:

> Rhiannon seeks to improve her lot by working with the system. Thus Rhiannon does not flee from the obligation to marry but simply chooses a type of man to suit her best…She works in harmony – if painfully so – with patriarchal society.[49]

She is passive at the wedding feast when Gwawl enters, 'allowing Pwyll the opportunity to prove himself by asserting his dominance…'[50] , but when he fails again her patience is pushed to exasperation and she orchestrates events, manipulating the men like tin soldiers in a war game, to her own advantage, climaxing in the total humiliation of Gwawl. As Lyn Webster Wilde says, 'Rhiannon makes a decisive play for the man she wants, rejecting the patriarchal order represented by her father.'[51]

So Rhiannon, prior to marriage, is a powerful initiator and controller of events, fitting in, as best she can, with social convention, but on her own terms and in her own way. It could be argued, though, that for her flouting of social norms prior to her marriage she had consequences to face later on. For example, Miranda Green says:

> Rhiannon's jilting of Gwawl led to the supernatural theft of the infant Pryderi, and to the devastation of Dyfed, which Llywd laid waste directly because of Gwawl's displacement.[52]

As Lisa Bitel says, in terms of the laws and rules of the social group, 'when women ignored their limits and their assigned roles…the risks were high.'[53] However, for Rhiannon her individual power and 'Otherworldly' status and magic, which seemed to be so distinct as a single woman, became progressively more blurred after marriage and virtually vanished after childbirth. As Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan comments:

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[48] Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007)p.11.
[49] Winward, F. 'The Women in the Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (1997), pp. 85-86
[50] *Ibid*., p.86
[51] Wilde, L.W. *Celtic Women: In Legend, Myth and History*. (London: Cassell PLC, 1997)p. 50.
[52] Green, M. *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*. (London: British Museum Press, 1995) p. 53
[53] Bitel, L. *Women in Early Medieval Europe:* 400-1100. (Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 199

> This equation of male/passivity, female/activity is reversed after the marriage. From that point on Rhiannon loses those mysterious, magical attributes so evident in her first meeting with Pwyll.[54]

To begin with Rhiannon fulfils her role of hospitality as 'neither a man or woman among them left Rhiannon without being given a notable gift.'[55] The Welsh Law of Women details the types and numbers of objects which could be gifted, according to the woman's rank, which indicates that this 'power of hospitality' was an important custom for medieval Welsh married noblewomen. Valente comments, 'Rhiannon is the pre-eminent gift-giver and organiser of feasts in *The Mabinogi…*'[56] Nevertheless in the third year of the marriage Rhiannon's position begins to be questioned – she was accused of failing to fulfil her most important role as the King's wife in this society – to produce an heir (male, of course) for the king. As Winward says, 'When the men of Dyfed become concerned about her child-bearing ability they reduce her to a faulty – and thus replaceable – chattel.'[57] So Rhiannon, subjecting herself to society's expectations, produces the male heir, yet as a mother it seems that her fortunes fall even further. As Winward says,

> In Rhiannon's case the impact of motherhood is particularly evident, since it follows the lovely orchestration of her courtship as a spirited and forceful single woman.[58]

When Rhiannon's new-born son disappears and she is accused of infanticide, she initially tries to reason with her accusers, urging them to tell the truth, and saying 'I will protect you.'[59] But her power seems to be diminished - her promise could not be enacted and the women know it. They also know, in a patriarchal society, where the power resides and that the word of women – even in a court of law – would not be heard.[60]

There is also something deeper, I would suggest, in this strange image of Rhiannon, smeared with the blood and surrounded by the bones, supposedly, of her own

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[54] Lloyd-Morgan, C. 'Gender and Violence in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' in *150 Jahre Mabinogion Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen Buchreihe der Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 19 (2001) pp68-69

[55] Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007)pp.15-16

[56]Valente, R.L '*Merched Y Mabinogi*: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986, p. 288

[57] Winward, F. Aspects of The Women in the Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (1997)p.97

[58] *Ibid*., p. 97

[59] Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007)p. 17

[60] As Wendy Davies comments: 'women did not normally act as witnesses to transactions; women did not act as sureties nor put down pledges; women did not give evidence in dispute proceedings nor witness settlements of them.' From Davies, W. 'Celtic Women in the Early Middle Ages' in Cameron, A. and Kuhrt, A. (eds.) *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London and Canberra: Croomhelm Press, 1983) p. 149. This amounted to the denial of any legal capacity for women at all levels of society.

murdered child. Ruth Padel comments on the patriarchal view of women as 'other.' She says,

> Behind these patterns I shall suggest, is a sense that women contain an inner space and inner darkness…in male perceptions of women [there is] a view that women can threaten male order, male life and sanity…61

As mentioned in the previous chapter, women's bodies in menstruation and childbirth were associated with 'nature', the antithesis of civilisation. This, along with Aristotle's view of the female principle as 'body' or 'matter' and the Christian doctrine of Original Sin, which regarded all matter as sinful, presented a view of women as not only 'other' but also unclean.

So, for example, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) in a medieval writing called *The Corbaccio* (meaning 'evil crow') says,

> No other creature is less clean than women: the pig, even when he is most wallowed in mud, is not as foul as they. If perhaps someone would deny this, let him consider their childbearing; let him search the secret places where they in shame hide the horrible instruments they employ to take away their superfluous humours.[62]

Howard Bloch says, 'In the misogynist thinking of the Middle Ages, there can, in fact, be no distinction between the theological and the gynaecological.'[63]

So Rhiannon, 'the mother who simultaneously gives life to and consumes her children' [64], accused of infanticide, begins the downward journey from independent woman of power to calumniated wife and mother, whose very future depends on the mercy of her husband.

The text states that she 'summoned wise and learned men' but as they merely witnessed the pointless spectacle of women's arguments, 'she thought it better to accept her punishment than argue with the women.'[65] Pwyll honourably refuses to divorce Rhiannon because in his estimation she has fulfilled her obligation to bear him a son. However, he seems powerless to rescue her from her fate, imposed unjustly by his male

[61] Padel, R. 'Women: Model For Possession by Greek Daemons' in Cameron, A and Kuhrt, A. (eds.) *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London and Canberra: Croomhelm Press, 1983) p. 3

[62] Blamires, A. (Ed.) *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) p.167.

[63] Bloch, H.R. 'Medieval Misogyny' in *Representations*, 20 (1987) p.20

[64] Thomas, N. A. 'The Daughters of Modron: Evangeline Walton's Re-visioning of The Mabinogi' Ph.D. Thesis for Southern New Hampshire University, 2013 p. 74

[65]Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007)p.17

advisors.[66] Instead of being the independent horse rider of her opening entrance, she is now reduced to a beast of burden,[67] as Ceridwen Lloyd Morgan says,

> This graphically symbolises her change of status and suggests masculine hatred towards a woman who had shown independence and intelligence, a hatred leading to the desire to punish the women who does not conform to social 'norms.'[68]

However, Rhiannon, even in her humiliation, is never submissively passive. As Valente reminds us, in *The Mabinogi,* particularly for the female characters, in a society of patriarchal power, speech is action – 'their chief power emerges through words'[69] – and Rhiannon is never speechless! Rhiannon's punishment is not only about carrying people on her back, it is also about 'telling her whole story to anyone whom she thought might not know it.'[70] Indeed the power of her words must have been impressive because 'rarely would anyone allow himself to be carried.'[71]

As a result, Rhiannon does not exactly fit the motif of the calumniated wife which 'is usually a passive figure, while it is the opposite quality in Rhiannon that gives the Welsh version much of its artistry.'[72] However, it is only when Rhiannon's lost son is restored to his rightful place – when the male heir is restored to his kingdom – that Rhiannon is also restored. As Valente says,

> The fertility element is the strongest one here….Pryderi's return is the return of success to Dyfed, as guaranteed by the fertility goddess's link to the sovereign of a land….Rhiannon's link to Pwyll, her husband, and then Pryderi her son, ultimately brings the reward of fertility and success to Dyfed's land and its people.[73]

Another symbol of her return to some element of status (though never again quite the forceful lady of her opening scenes) is her ability to name her own child, and in

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[66] Miranda Green comments, 'If Rhiannon was some kind of goddess of sovereignty, her apparent lack of ability to produce an heir would have had serious consequences for the prosperity of Dyfed, since she would have conferred her sterile status on to her husband and thence to the land itself.' Green, M. *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*. (London: British Museum Press, 1995)p. 51

[67] Several scholars discuss the inappropriateness of Rhiannon's punishment in relation to her supposed offence. For example, Gruffydd says that her punishment only makes sense if she were tied to a particular function, that of a horse goddess – as equine goddess she is as much mare as woman. Gruffydd, W.J. *Rhiannon. An Inquiry into the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1953).

[68] Lloyd-Morgan, C. 'Gender and Violence in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' in *150 Jahre Mabinogion Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen Buchreihe der Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 19 (2001)p. 69.

[69] Valente, R.L '*Merched Y Mabinogi*: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986 p. 64

[70] Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007)p.17

[71] *Ibid*., p.17

[72] Wood, J. 'The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature' in Sullivan C.J. (Ed.) *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays* (N.Y. and London: Garland Publishing INC, 1996) p. 70

[73] Valente, R.L '*Merched Y Mabinogi*: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986 p. 128

fact this is the last recorded speech attributed to Rhiannon in the First Branch. [74] Therefore, in terms of status Rhiannon's social position as a single woman is very different from her status as a wife, and even worse as a mother. As Winward says, 'Rhiannon ….is spirited and powerful as a single woman, and defeatist and briefly nameless as a wife and mother.'[75]

In the First Branch there is also a contrasting view of marriage offered within the text represented by Teyrnon and his (unnamed) wife, the 'foster-carers' of Pryderi. Two particular aspects stand out in terms of their marriage relationship.

Firstly, there is the constant communication between them, in contrast to the seeming breakdown in communication between Pwyll and Rhiannon. Before the mysterious event at the feast of Bealtaine (May-eve), Teyrnon discusses his concerns and develops a plan of action along with his wife, showing both courtesy and courage. After the 'enormous claw' is vanquished, he goes immediately to share the news of the foundling with his wife. Again, together they agree on a plan of action with obvious concern for each other's needs and status. When Teyrnon begins to realise the true identity of the boy, again, he talks through his concerns with his wife and it is she who finally agrees to take the boy to Pwyll, which they also do together.

The second aspect which contrasts with the marriage relationship between Pwyll and Rhiannon is the mutual respect which Teyrnon and his wife show in their treatment of each other. For example, when Teyrnon goes to tell his wife about finding Pryderi, he politely enquires – 'My lady, are you asleep?',[76] and in response she addresses him as 'Lord.' This contrasts with Rhiannon's sometimes impatient and disrespectful words to Pwyll, for example, 'never has a man been more stupid than you have.'[77] Teyrnon's wife sometimes takes the initiative in decision making, but in doing so she takes into account the social status of her husband and ensures she goes through the proper protocol. For

[74] C.W. Sullivan suggests, with particular reference to the lineage of Dôn in the Fourth Branch, that the naming may denote elements of matrilineality. He says that these traditions suggest a continuing, if fading, influence from an older matrilineal tradition most clearly illustrated in the laws and customs regarding marriage. Sullivan, C.W. 'Inheritance and Lordship in Math' in his *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland, 1996) pp. 347-365.

[75] Winward, F. Aspects of The Women in the Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (1997)p. 101
[76] Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007)p. 18
[77] *Ibid.,* p. 12

example, she asks Teyrnon's permission to give the foal to the boy and Teyrnon says 'I will let you give it to him' – fulfilling the Welsh Law of Women which says that women can only give certain gifts without the consent of their husband.[78] In his turn, Teyrnon shows great compassion for his wife's barrenness in attempting to provide her with the child she longs for - 'Here is a son for you, if you want,…something you have never had'[79] In a society where the genders were strictly tied to social functions and where women's role as mother and child-bearer was central, childlessness was a cause of great sorrow and shame.[80] However, for Teyrnon and his wife their mutual devotion and respect seemed to overcome this, so that they were both also able to let go of the child when it seemed right. In contrast, the birth of Rhiannon's son led to further division between her and Pywll, so much so that, although she speaks with 'wise and learned man' she seems to exclude Pwyll and in turn, without respect or consultation, he hands her over to her punishment of humiliation and shame. Teyrnon's wife respects the social boundaries of her status as a wife and in response Teyrnon treats her with courteous respect and endeavours, to the best of his ability, to ensure her well-being. Their marriage is 'team-work' rather than two individuals going their own way – as Rhiannon and Pwyll appear to be.[81]

Therefore Rhiannon's assertive, impatient and even haughty nature as a single woman is powerfully challenged and subdued by marriage and child-birth. Her defiance of the 'rules' in terms of betrothal and her independent character, in conjunction with Pwyll's inability to listen and communicate effectively create difficulties for the essentials of medieval marriage. This is starkly contrasted with Teyrnon's constant consultation with his wife, and her respectful acknowledgement of his status.

Rhiannon's story continues in the Third Branch with a second marriage in her more mature years to Manawydan. Branch Three begins in the aftermath of the horrors of The Second Branch, with Manawydan expressing 'sorrow', presumably for all

[78] *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) p. 52

[79] Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 18.

[80] And indeed a reason for legitimate divorce – as Pwyll says of Rhiannon, 'They have no reason to ask me to divorce my wife, unless she has no children.' *Ibid.,* P. 17

[81] Emphasized by Rhiannon going her own way on horseback at the outset of The First Branch – as if she is a wilful mare that needs to be broken in!

the devastation that has happened – and 'longing for a place to go tonight[82]' – a home – though not his dead brother's home.

Immediately Pryderi suggests the marriage of Manawydan to his mother which, he says, will include the 'benefits' of 'the seven cantrefs of Dyfed.'[83] We are reminded, firstly that medieval marriage was a contract, as stated in chapter one, as much about property and material goods as it was about relationship. Secondly, that medieval marriage was formally arranged by men, and women, although having the right to be consulted, must acquiesce to this male public role.

Pryderi describes the attributes of his mother to Manawydan as firstly, a skilled conversationalist and secondly, a woman of beauty. As Valente comments:

> The visual images of the women of the Mabinogi are drawn minimally, for example, Rhiannon's beauty is not as important as the fact that she is ymdidanwreic ('a woman of conversation.').84

Both Rhiannon and Cigfa are also portrayed as women of hospitality, arranging and presiding over a feast of welcome for the men.

A harmonious picture of male/female relationships is portrayed in the description of Manawydan and Rhiannon's meeting:-

> Then Manawydan and Rhiannon sat together and began to converse; and as a result of that conversation his head and heart grew tender towards her, and he was delighted that he had never seen a woman who was fairer or more beautiful than her.85

At this point Manawydan gives his assent to Pryderi's proposal and Rhiannon, although seeming to hear only second-hand from Pryderi ('I have given you as a wife to Manawydan'[86]), readily assents – 'I will agree to that gladly.'[87] However, it is also clear that, as Rhiannon is older and the complications of offspring and heirs are removed from the picture, the prospects of a good marriage are brighter. For example, Manawydan thanks

[82]Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 35
[83] *Ibid*., p. 35
[84] Valente, R.L '*Merched Y Mabinogi*: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986 p. 108
[85] Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 36
[86] *Ibid.,* p. 36
[87] *Ibid.,* p. 36

God for the 'perfect friendship,'[88] which may refer to his friendship with Pryderi, but also implies a marriage alliance of camaraderie.

Also, we might ask whether Rhiannon's acquiescence to being 'given' in marriage - in contrast to Branch One, where she is determined to make her own choice of marriage partner - indicates an evolving submissiveness? For example, Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan says that this proves 'She has become just another woman subservient to masculine power. She has no right to refuse.'[89] However, although this may be so, it is also true that it seems clear in the text that Rhiannon's relationship with Manawydan is a truly equal and affable one and that she has lost very little of her impetuous, passionate nature, even accompanying the men on the hunt.

In addition, Manawydan is clearly an equal marriage partner for Rhiannon, as Sioned Davies notes – 'His name and patronymic equate him with the Irish god of the sea, Manannán mac Lir.'[90] This relates to the fertility myth of the divine marriage of male and female referred to previously, which also emphasizes the equal status of Rhiannon's role in the marriage.

Two other aspects of the marriage of Manawydan and Rhiannon are important to note. Firstly, there is Rhiannon's reaction to the disappearance of Pryderi. Immediately she accuses Manawydan in very black and white terms – 'an evil companion you have been, and a good companion you have lost.' [91] This incident shows the strong bond between a mother and her son, and, as Valente comments, she 'clearly has a different emotional and obligatory bond with him than Manawydan does' [92]– and she also seems to have stronger bond with her son than her husband.[93]

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[88] *The Mabinogion.* Transl. by Ellis, T.P and Lloyd, J. Volume one, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929). P. 78. As Fiona Winward says – 'It is not marriage so much as motherhood that adversely affects Rhiannon.' Winward, F. 'The Women in the Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (1997)p. 85.

[89] Lloyd-Morgan, Ceridwen, 'Gender and Violence in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' in *150 Jahre Mabinogion Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen Buchreihe der Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 19 (2001)p. 69.

[90] Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 232. It is also interesting to note here that the marriage 'wealth' seems to be coming from Rhiannon's kin, through Pryderi – we could say, in contemporary language that Manawydan is a 'kept man'!

[91] *The Mabinogion.* Transl. by Ellis, T.P and Lloyd, J. Volume one, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929). P. 86

[92] Valente, R.L '*Merched Y Mabinogi*: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986 p. 231

[93] Though the fear of loss may be stronger because of the previous abduction experience described in Branch One.

Secondly, there is also an implication that Rhiannon is being punished for her refusal in the First Branch to honour the social role of men in marriage arrangement and, in particular, her shameful treatment of Gwawl. Speaking of the desolation of the land of Dyfed, Llwyd Cil Coed admits, 'I did so to avenge Gwawl, son of Clud….and I took revenge on Pryderi because Pwyll Pen Annwfn played Badger in the Bag with Gwawl… and he did that unwisely at the court of Hyfaidd Hen.'[94] It is only when the injustice meted out to Gwawl is finally dealt with, that the land can be restored as Manawydan and Rhiannon, Pryderi and Cigfa are reunited – a clear continuation of the fertility myth.

There is also the tale of the wife of Llwyd Cil Coed in the Third Branch – a story which seems to show that very often women will stand alongside their men in punishment of the perceived lapses of other women. The wife of Llwyd Cil Coed, although pregnant, is seemingly willing (as the text says she **asks** to be transformed) to be shape-shifted into a mouse (symbol of timidity) to assist the male cause of justice. Ultimately it is only through the intervention of the honourable and wise Manawydan that the cycle of reprisal is brought to an end and the land restored. The message of The Third Branch is a warning that breaches of the social rules, if not dealt with immediately, will return, Karma-like, to haunt the perpetrators.

Finally, in Branch Three, there is the marriage of Pryderi and Cigfa. She is first mentioned by Pryderi in relation to the seven cantrefs of Dyfed – 'My wife is Cigfa, daughter of Gwyn Gloyw…And although the realm will be mine in name, let the benefits be yours and Rhiannon's. And if you ever wanted a realm of your own, perhaps you could take that one.'[95] Clearly Cigfa has not been consulted prior to this offer, and we can only speculate how Cigfa may have felt about this decision or how it might have impacted upon her marriage relationship – or indeed the relationship between Cigfa and her mother-in-law. As 'chattels' in a medieval society, where property was largely a male entitlement, we can only assume that women may have often been placed in difficult situations within kinship marriage relationships. [96]

[94]Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007)p. 45
[95]*Ibid.,* p. 35
[96] See R.R. Davies on the status of women and the practice of marriage *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) p. 107.

There is also the issue of Cigfa's vulnerability after Pryderi and Rhiannon have disappeared. It is clear that, whereas Manawydan has no issues with his status, Cigfa is extremely anxious and fearful – 'When Cigfa, daughter of Gwynn Gloyw, wife of Pryderi, saw that she and Manawydan were alone in the court she lamented that she did not care whether she lived or died.'[97] The text mentions her father and her husband to emphasise that Cigfa was without 'natural protectors' - as all medieval women were dependent upon their male kin for 'protection', as previously mentioned.

As Valente says,

> Cigfa's *naud* or 'protection' should come from her husband, as would her honour and status, but Pryderi has mysteriously disappeared and might well be dead. Legally, a woman who has no near male kin must rely on the lord of the land to protect her, and in this situation Manawydan is the only man in sight who might qualify in this respect. Manawydan's words are meant not only to comfort Cigfa, but to make the strongest possible contract of protection with her.[98]

The Third Branch, again, reminds us of the social rules and the need for both women and men to acquiesce to the rules and to behave honourably in relation to one another. The practice of honour in marriage and the acknowledgement of obligation by both genders eventually enables the restoration of social harmony. As Valente says,

> where the women are faithful to their responsibilities and where men respect their powers, the social group finds stability and just resolutions to unexpected difficulties or decisions. When either gender sets out to do anything without regard to the obligations owed to the other, the social group breaks apart.[99]

This becomes even clearer in the Second Branch of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi,* the tale of Branwen.

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[97] Davies, S. (Transl.) *The Mabinogion* (Oxford University Press, 2007)p. 40

[98] Valente, Roberta, L. 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in Math', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 35 (1988), pp. 334

[99] Valente, R.L '*Merched Y Mabinogi*: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986 p. 283

Chapter Three – The Second Branch – Marriage, Kinship and Honour.

The Second Branch, set mainly in Ireland, concerns a particular royal household and their attempts to secure a political alliance through an advantageous marriage. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, medieval marriage was largely regarded as a **contract** between two families, offering potential for kinship alliances and an extension of property and material goods – for example, animals and household goods. As Lisa Bitel comments:

> A woman had to be ready to accept a contract of marriage when the head of her family decided to send her to another man….marriage remained a multi-purpose contract aimed at creating a social union, a reproductive unit and a household economy….[and] marriage involved the members of a larger family group.[100]

R.R. Davies, commenting on the Welsh law of women and the practice of marriage, says that the role of the woman in marriage is limited to procreation.

> In a society where title depends on membership of a patrilineage and is restricted to the male members of a four-generation agnatic group, the woman has strictly speaking no role to play other than as the bearer of male offspring. [101]

So the Second Branch's tragic tale of Branwen deals with some of these central issues for women within marriage – kinship connections, procreation and honour – abuses of which lead ultimately to social chaos.

The opening paragraph of the Second Branch highlights the importance of kinship with a listing of the kinship connections – the King, Bendigeidfran, his brother, Manawydan and his two half-brothers, Nysien and Efnysien. Their naming is accompanied by a rare authorial moral judgement on their characters – 'One of these was a good lad….the other would cause two…to fight.'[102]

The story tells of a political alliance of two nations which was to be achieved through the unification of two families by the marriage of Branwen, sister of the King, to Matholwch, the King of Ireland. The role of a wife as 'peaceweaver' between kins is

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[100] Bitel, L. *Women in Early Medieval Europe:* 400-1100. (Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 167

[101] *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) p. 101.

[102] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 23

emphasized – 'He has come to ask for Branwen daughter of Llŷr….he wishes to join together the Island of the Mighty and Ireland so that they might be the stronger.'[103]

Clearly Branwen is central to these political machinations, and yet, as Winward says,

> While there are lengthy descriptions of the feasts at which she is present and of the conversation between her brother and her husband, Branwen is indeed no more than a presence. Although legally entitled to accept or refuse betrothal[104], she does not voice her opinion: we can only assume acquiescence.[105]

However, in contrast to Branwen's acquiescence, Efnysien objects to his exclusion from the consultation process, claims to be insulted and violently and horrifically mutilates the horses of the Irish king. Here the Second Branch enters the legal framework of *Sarhaed* and honour, though it would seem that, as the half-brother of Branwen, having the same mother but different fathers, he has no real legal right in a patrilineal kinship system. Indeed, as Lesley Jacobs points out, his violence is actually an offence against the British king as 'medieval Welsh Laws of hospitality dictated that an offence to a guest meant an offence to his host.'[106]

So Bendigeidfran offers Matholwch compensation for the insult in accordance with the law regarding injuries to animals and Matholwch 'decided that, were they to refuse the offer, they would be more likely to get further shame than further compensation.'[107] This seems a materialistic weighing up of the options and indeed the whole episode underlines the complexity of the Law concerning *sarhaed*, kinship and honour. Morfydd E. Owen states that

> 'Insult (*sarhaed*) implies blemish (*mefl*) and *sarhaed* to kin as well as individual, such blemish (*mefl*) can only be removed by *sarhaed* (reparation) or otherwise vengeance (*dial*) will arise; once reparation is made by payment of *sarhaed*, shame (*gwaradwydd*) is removed, and the kin is shamefree (*diwaradwydd*).108

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[103] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 23

[104] T.P Ellis points out that, according to the Laws, 'the woman must be a free consenting party' – see Ellis, T.P. 'Legal References, terms and Conceptions in the Mabinogion', *Y Cymmrodor* 39 (1928), p.124

[105] Winward, F. 'Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* Vol 34: (1997), p. 93.

[106] Jacobs, L. 'Trouble in the Island of the Mighty:Kinship and Violence in Branwen Ferch Lyr', *Viator* (2009) p120

[107] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 25

[108] *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) p. 47.

These Welsh Laws reflected a hierarchical society in which an individual's honour and status are vital and loss of honour leads to shame which must be compensated. In addition, these laws were imposed by kin group authority, rather than any centralised state judicial system and therefore, as underlined by the fate of Branwen, were not always effective in restraining the desire for revenge – especially when there was discontent and unwillingness to accept the compensation legally stipulated. As Nerys Patterson explains,

> Punishment could only control the socially weak; to the powerful punishment was unacceptable insult, provoking retaliation, for their behaviour was subject only to the self-control that arose from the sincerity of their adherence to the code of honour.[109]

The author of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* seems to be illustrating the weakness of the kin-based legal system and sets up a contrast between the fate of Branwen, the embodiment of authentic peace-weaving honour in marriage, and those who indulge in the egotistic violence of heroic culture. Efnysien, in particular, represents the feuding and violent nature of the heroic warrior culture, as Lesley Jacobs says, 'he incarnates the potential for violence inherent in the uncertain and competitive kinship structures of medieval Wales.'[110]

In addition, within such a kinship system, marriage for women involved dual links with birth family and marriage family. Morfydd E. Owen calls these 'ties of blood' and 'bonds of marriage' and explains:

> Her links were dual. They lay both with the kin into which she was born and with the kin with which she was associated through her husband after marriage. Despite, or because of, this her role in society was an important and delicately balanced one, governed by subtle conventions of behaviour, for she was the genetrice in whose person lay the future of her husband's kin, and her own kin was well aware of this role and conscious of the need to preserve her honour. She served also as a unifying force between kins.[111]

At this point in the evolving tale of the Second Branch Bendigeidfran offers Matholwch a Cauldron as part of the reparation and a story of another married couple is incorporated – that of Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid and his wife Cymidei Cymeinfoll. Two facets of

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[109] Patterson, N. 'Honour and Shame in Medieval Welsh Society: A Study of the Role of Burlesque in the Welsh Laws' *Studia Celtica*, 1981-2, Vol. 16-17: p. 75

[110] Jacobs, L. 'Trouble in the Island of the Mighty:Kinship and Violence in Branwen Ferch Lyr', *Viator* (2009)p120. NOTE - Jacobs speaks of two rival inheritance systems in medieval Wales, 'Partibility', by which land was divided equally among male heirs, and 'Unitary Succession' where 'sons, brothers or cousins of a designated heir would dispute the succession and lay claim to rule, which frequently resulted in dismemberment of a kingdom as well as the slaughter of kin.' (p. 115)

[111] *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) p. 41

this strange story underline aspects of the experience of marriage for women in a violent and patriarchal medieval warrior culture.

Firstly, the emphasis which is placed on the procreative role of Cymidei Cymeinfoll – she is the woman who not only produces babies on a regular basis, but – important in a heroic culture – those babies are 'fully armed warriors.'[112]

Secondly, just as the fertility of women is 'part and parcel of their father's wealth, to be traded upwards whenever possible'[113] so the Cauldron of Rebirth, sacred Celtic symbol of life and fertility, is dishonoured and disrespected by being thrown in to the bartering deal – along with Branwen![114]

Mary Condren says of the 'cult' of the warrior and the hero, 'Whereas female creativity took place with regard to life, which included respect for death, male creativity had become inextricably bound up with the defiance of death.'[115]

Within such a society, as *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* shows, marriage for women was often a form of subjugation, as Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan says:

> In the Four Branches of The Mabinogi women inhabit a world where violence is endemic…Women never appear on the stage until they are physically mature and therefore ready for marriage or some other sexual union with a man. Violence, whether psychological or physical, is then used to assert and confirm the subjugation of the woman to masculine power.[116]

This certainly reflects Branwen's experience of marriage as she is a silent pawn in a powerful game, a commodity to be exchanged.

Upon arriving in Ireland Branwen carries out the usual duties of hospitality expected of a noblewoman and 'she gained renown that year, and flourished with honour and companions.'[117] So, again, Branwen, the embodiment of honour, fulfils all that is expected of her in every way. As Sioned Davies says,

> 'The author paints her as the ideal women – she is the most beautiful maiden in the world, and is also extremely generous as reflected in her behaviour on her arrival in Ireland.'[118]

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[112] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007)p. 26

[113] Condren, M. *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1989) p. 158.

[114] Sioned Davies in her explanatory notes, emphasizes the importance of cauldrons which 'played a significant part in Celtic ritual.' Ibid., p. 233.

[115] Ibid., p. 36.

[116] Lloyd-Morgan, C. 'Gender and Violence in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' in *150 Jahre Mabinogion Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen Buchreihe der Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 19 (2001)p.73

[117] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 27

[118] Davies, S, *The Four Branches of The Mabinogi* (Dyfed: Gomer Press, 1993)p. 78

However, it is after Branwen gives birth to a son, Gwern, that, like Rhiannon, her fortunes quickly slide downhill. Here the root cause is *sarhaed*, dissatisfaction and a desire for revenge against a background of heroic culture.

Firstly, Branwen is expelled from the marriage bed which Morfydd E. Owen describes as 'one of the three shames of a wife and of her kin, according to the Law books.' [119] She is further humiliated by being forced to cook for the court and each day is struck on the ear by a butcher 'after he had chopped up meat.'[120] The irony of Branwen – the silent listener – being struck on her ear, underlines the outrage of the injustice being done to her.[121] Lesley Jacobs comments,

> Branwen's position at this point in the tale, removed from her husband as well as her child, who had been sent to fosterage, is one of extreme vulnerability.122

As we have already seen, in a patriarchal society women had to be connected to and protected by a male at every stage of their lives.[123]

Branwen was also in an exogamous marriage – being married outside her own social group - far from her home and blood-kin, and at the mercy of her in-laws. Morfydd E. Owen quotes Jean Poirier on the status of women in archaic societies, explaining that in exogamous marriages the 'woman bears a fault-bearing role and lives in a condition of perpetual alienation, never completely integrated into her husband's family.'[124] The negativity towards exogamous marriage is indicated by the fact that the children of a woman who married into a foreign kinship group were called *gwartheg dyfach*, cattle of dark ancestry[125]. In Irish law the child of a foreigner was called *glasffne* – grey kin – and both had limited status.

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[119]*The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) p. 59

[120]*The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 28

[121] Sioned Davies comments about the serious nature of this daily strike, 'according to Welsh medieval Laws….insult is done to a queen in three ways,: One is to break her protection. A second is to strike her a blow. A third is to snatch something from her hand.' Ibid., p. 234

[122]Jacobs, L. 'Trouble in the Island of the Mighty:Kinship and Violence in Branwen Ferch Lyr', *Viator* (2009)p123

[123] As an early Irish Law Tract stated, 'Her father watches over her when she is a girl; her *cétmuinter* watches over her when she is the wife of a *cétmuinter;* her sons watch over her when she is a woman with children; her kin watch over her when she is a woman of the kin….the Church watches over her when she is a woman of the Church.' Thurneysen, Rudolph et al, *Studies in Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1936) pp. 213-14.

[124] *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) p. 60

[125] *Ibid.,* p. 205

Some scholars, such as W.J. Gruffydd, have suggested that Branwen's story is clearly an example of the calumniated wife motif. Juliette Wood has argued that, although Branwen generally fits the motif, yet characteristic elements of the tale are missing and she ascribes this to conscious literary changes made by the author – 'a literary adaptation of a folk-tale.'[126] However, others such as Andrew Welsh argue that the tale does not fit the motif at all, and that Branwen is not a calumniated wife, but a tragic peaceweaver.[127] Certainly she is an innocent victim and, as such, her situation requires justice.

Indeed it seems that from this point onwards in the tale Branwen takes affirmative action, as Winward puts it, 'her spirit does not allow her to suffer the humiliation.'[128] This also emphasises the fact in the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* that, although the women are often unjustly treated, they are never totally acquiescent to oppression and intimidation.

As an expression of her nurturing nature, Branwen nurtures a starling, and in the absence of any opportunity to speak out about her injustice, teaches the bird to speak on her behalf. As Valente comments, 'the Law guarantees a *tavodyavac*, a tongue.[129]

In terms of the power of the spoken word Branwen's silence contrasts starkly with the other female characters in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi.* Proinsias MacCana referred to Branwen as 'a shadowy, wilting figure' and 'a flacid, colourless creation.'[130] However, it could also be said that in teaching a starling how to speak, Branwen is actively refusing to suffer in silence - her dignity requires her to address the injustices done to her status and honour. Miranda Green also suggests that 'the episode of the starling shows initiative and also some supernatural skills in bridging the gulf of communication between human and animal.'[131]

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[126] Wood, J. 'The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 10 Winter 1985 pp. 36-37

[127] Welsh, A. 'Branwen, Beowulf and the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale' *Viator* (Medieval and Renaissance Studies) 1991, pp. 1-14.

[128] Winward, F. 'Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* Vol 34: (1997), p. 94

[129] Valente, R.L 'Merched Y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986 p. 207

[130] MacCana, P. *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992) p.57.

[131] Green, M. *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*. (London: British Museum Press, 1995)p.56.

The point is that, in terms of her marriage, Branwen does what she can to ensure her role is honoured and acts independently in sending the starling to seek help from her blood kin. Although outwardly passive, 'Branwen was an enabler, a catalyst, whose existence caused things to happen.'[132]

So Branwen speaks her first words in the Second Branch when finally consulted by the men of the tale (though only Matholwch's messengers), and aware of her subjugation and humiliation, she says, 'Although I am no 'lady' I know what it is: the men of the Island of the Mighty coming over, having heard of my punishment and dishonour.'[133] As Nicole Thomas comments, 'Branwen ceaselessly shifts from one man's dubious protection to another's.'[134]

However, the Irishmen know – as does Branwen – that, as a princess of the Island of the Mighty, she has an important representative role. This tale is not about an unconnected, insignificant woman – as most ordinary medieval women were – but about a female member of a royal household whose treatment by her husband was not just a personal matter, but the concern of her people – both Welsh and Irish. Her shame is both personal and public.[135]

It is no coincidence that Branwen finally speaks when she invokes her powerful kinship connections, and in a society where legal obligations and personal conduct were central to social well-being and political peace, Branwen's mistreatment represented a serious violation of the social codes. At this moment she wields political power, and she knows it.

In response the Irish panic and feebly try to destroy a bridge to inhibit the progress of the Welsh giant, but to no avail. Straightway Matholwch is forced into offering Gwern the kingship of Ireland 'to make up for the injustice and injury that was done to Branwen.'[136]

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[132] Ibid., p. 57

[133] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007)p. 29

[134] Thomas,N.A. 'The Daughters of Modron: Evangeline Walton's Re-visioning of The Mabinogi' Ph.D. Thesis for Southern New Hampshire University, 2013. P.101

[135] It also begs the question – if this was how a royal princess experienced marriage, how much worse was married life for ordinary women?

[136] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007)p. 30

Again Branwen is not spoken to directly, but it is her brother, her closest kinsman, who must be placated. Matholwch's offer is certainly magnanimous as, according to both Welsh and Irish Law, the male children of a woman who married into a foreign kinship group could not participate fully in the patrilineal inheritance practices and could only expect a limited inheritance through the mother's line. As Valente says,

> 'Matholwch's compensatory offer then is a gift of exceptional privilege and power, one which would eradicate forever the insecurity and peripheral status Branwen and her son might ordinarily expect to endure.'[137]

Nevertheless, Bendigeidfran refuses the offer, seemingly for selfish reasons – 'If I myself cannot have the kingship…'[138] Into the breach between the two kins Branwen steps again, persuading Bendigeidfran to accept the offer of a house built in his honour and Matholwch's kingship placed at his disposal – 'and that was all done on Branwen's advice because she feared that the country would be laid waste.'[139] Here Branwen's peaceweaving counsel is shown to be powerful and influential, as Miranda Green says:

> Indeed the meeting of the Irish and Welsh nobles was called The Assembly of Branwen and Matholwch, as if she had the primary rank. Only Branwen was able to decipher the apparent mystery of the forest and the mountain on the sea that represented the invasion of her brother and his ships.[140]

In all her actions Branwen is shown to be faultless, fulfilling all her obligations as an exemplary wife. As a virgin bride she represented the most honourable of the nine kinds of sexual union (see chapter one). She was a generous and caring queen in her practice of hospitality. She produced the required male heir, and through her peace-weaving skills, to the best of her ability, strived to be a link between kins and a symbol of unity for the royal houses of Britain and Ireland. Her role within the marriage as the embodiment of authentic honour is starkly contrasted with the selfish, violent and ego-centric male warrior sort of 'honour', represented especially by Efnysien, and also at times in this tale by Bendigeidfran and the Irish. As Andrew Welsh says,

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[137] Valente, R.L 'Merched Y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986 pp. 213-4

[138] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007p. 30

[139] *Ibid.,* p. 30

[140] Green, M. *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*. (London: British Museum Press, 1995)p. 56

> 'Working against the peaceweaver are forces of irrational malice and hate, always in the guise of honour and patriotism, and in this tale incarnated in the figure of her half-brother, Efnysien.'[141]

The situation is reminiscent of a verse in the ancient Psalms – 'If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?'[142] In other words, if the foundations of society are corrupt, then even good people – the Branwens of this world – become powerless. In fact the powerlessness and unjust treatment of such an honourable person are condemnation in itself of the social depravity.

As each side waits to take advantage of any perceived weakness of the other, three horrific actions of Efnysien bring the tale to a crazed and violent conclusion. The first is the crushing to death of the hidden Irish warriors by sinking his fingers 'into the brain through the bone.'[143] His second act of violence – the insult for which there can be no compensation – is the murder of his own nephew, Gwern, by burning. This 'outrage' – as he himself calls it – is totally opposed to all codes of honour for not only has he murdered the king (as Gwern had already been invested with the kingship), but his very own nephew – and in Celtic society the relationship of maternal uncle and sister's son was an especially significant one.[144] As Lesley Jacobs says:

> The failure of kinship bonds doesn't come from an outsider in the end, but from one of the closest relations possible in Celtic society….The real-world contradiction here is that protectors can and do kill. Even those supposed to be benevolent can harm their closest relations.[145]

At this stage, Branwen, whose ultimate powerlessness is now complete, is physically held, against her will, by her own brother from rescuing her son.

Efnysien's final destructive deed, as he puts an end to his own life, is also an abuse of the sacred Cauldron of Rebirth – exploited by the men of violence for their own deathly ends. Breaking the Cauldron into four pieces – perhaps indicating the four directions, and therefore the magnitude of this terrible deed – Efnysien destroys himself in

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[141] Welsh, A. 'Branwen, Beowulf and the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale' *Viator* (Medieval and Renaissance Studies) 1991, p.8

[142] Psalm 11:3 , *The Holy Bible* N.R.S.V. (Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 505

[143] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007)p. 31

[144] For example, the relationship between Gwydion and Lleu in the Fourth Branch.

[145] Jacobs, L. 'Trouble in the Island of the Mighty:Kinship and Violence in Branwen Ferch Lyr', *Viator* (2009)pp.127 & 131.

his own crazed grief. It may be interpreted as an act of personal repentance, however, in the context of the devastating social consequences, it could never be adequate.

Patrick Ford has suggested that these three violent actions – along with several other incidents in Branwen's tale – indicate the chaos of the warrior culture and that 'the whole makes some sort of statement about the role of military might in society.'[146] It could also be suggested that the warrior culture, with its chaos and violence, is in direct opposition to order, life and fertility – as represented by the honourable Branwen and also symbolised by the sacred Cauldron of Re-birth. There is a stark contrast here between life and death, and in a society where basic kinship relationships – and even marriage itself – are awry and twisted, there is no future for Branwen either. Both the peace-maker, Branwen, and the peace-destroyer, Efnysien, are annihilated by the violence. The madness and chaos is underscored by the mention of 'the birds of Rhiannon' which have 'the power to wake the dead and lull the living to sleep.'[147]

In conclusion, the tale of Branwen shows how, in marriage – and especially, in this case, exogamous marriage – women are ambivalently situated between two kins with resulting vulnerabilities and difficulties.

The Second Branch also shows the weakness of the Laws relating to *sarhaed*, insult and compensation, in a warrior culture of egocentric 'honour.' As Jacobs says,

> 'In Branwen, the system of marriage and alliance intended to prevent violence ultimately implodes, destroying those who have tried to live by it (Branwen) as well as those who have rebelled against it (Efnysien).'[148]

At the heart of the tale is Branwen, a married woman and mother, at the mercy of powerful social forces - yet showing ingenuity, concern for the well-being of others, wisdom and strength in the face of injustice - as the embodiment of authentic honour and life-affirming creativity. Her tragic death is the ultimate sentence upon the society in which she tried to live.

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[146] Ford, P.K. 'Branwen: A Study of the Celtic Affinities' in Sullivan, C.W. *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland, 1996)p.112

[147] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007)p.32 & p.196

[148] Jacobs, L. 'Trouble in the Island of the Mighty:Kinship and Violence in Branwen Ferch Lyr', *Viator* (20090 p. 133

Chapter Four - The Fourth Branch – Breaking the Rules.

As we noted in chapter one of this thesis, one of the fundamental functions of marriage concerns social stability. Social civilization has added layers of rules and regulations relating to the legitimacy of pairings and reproduction – and marriage is a fundamental part of this, ensuring legally regulated forms of relationship. In addition, around these rules of relationship, codes of behaviour pertaining to each gender have developed. For example, in terms of the female, in medieval society there was an expectation of mothers to be nurturing and maternal regarding the care of their children. However, The Fourth Branch of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* contains dramatic stories of violations of roles and rules by both male and female characters.

There are two examples of marriage in the Fourth Branch, and both are unusual. The first is the marriage of Goewin, the virgin foot-holder, to Math, Lord of Gwynedd, who marries her after she is raped by Gwydion. The rape of Goewin illustrates both the vulnerability of women in a patriarchal society and also the perceived power of virginity. In terms of the former, as we have already noted, women in medieval society were defined through their nearest male kin – fathers, brothers or husbands – in the role of 'protector.' As Valente comments, 'in keeping with the essence of medieval Welsh Law, most of the women of the Four Branches live under the protection of their male kin and are named according to their relationships to these men…'[149] However, the rape of a virgin was considered an offence against the king himself, as 'the safe-keeping of virgins lay within the king's *nawdd* or 'protection.'[150]

[149] Valente, R.L. 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in Math', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 35 (1988), pp. 331-345 (p. 333)

[150] *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980) p. 49. The rape of a married woman was considered as an offence against her husband and had different consequences.

The rape of Goewin also illustrates the power of virginity in Welsh medieval culture, as referred to in chapter one. In many traditions world-wide, virginity is perceived as a powerful source of fertility, undiluted and intense. Math's kingship draws potency from the ritual of the virgin footholder, and her rape is a profound violation, both personally and socially.

As Jane Cartwright notes,

> the message implicit [in the Fourth Branch] is that virginity and fertility were not personal, private matters, for they were of extreme importance to the kin group as a whole.[151]

There is also an implication here that, although Goewin's role is essentially passive, it is nonetheless of vital importance in that Math is dependent upon Goewin, as she is for her protection upon him. This is a two-way arrangement which each is called upon to fulfil, and following her violation Goewin[152] has no hesitation about naming her attackers, as Winward comments, 'portraying the rape as a breach of kinship ethics.'[153] As a result Math arranges honourable recompense for Goewin – 'I will take you as my wife, and give you authority over my kingdom',[154] and Gwydion and Gilfaethwy are justly punished.[155] So the restoration of order after violation is represented by the union of male and female in a marital relationship.

The second marriage in the Fourth Branch is the union of Lleu and Blodeuedd. However, because this marriage is linked with the behaviour and actions of Aranrhod – indeed because of her Blodeuedd was created – some aspects of Aranrhod's story need to be firstly considered. In particular, the circumstances of Lleu's birth, Aranrhod's refusal of the maternal role and her lifestyle as an independent, unprotected woman – all of which also add to the picture of the experience of medieval marriage.

Aranrhod first appears in the Fourth Branch as Goewin's potential replacement as virgin footholder, though not as her choice – 'she was brought to Math.'[156]

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[151] Cartwright, J. 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose', in *Medieval Virginities*, ed. By Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003)pp. 56-79. (P. 63)

[152] Her name means 'daring' and 'bold' - Winward, F. 'Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* Vol 34: (1997), p. 86.

[153] I*bid*., p. 86

[154]*The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007)p. 52

[155] Valente suggests that their punishment is aimed at teaching them 'the vulnerability of the female role when men are unconcerned with the codes that protect women.' Valente, Roberta, L. 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in Math', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 35 (1988), pp. 337-8.

[156] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007.p. 54

Propelled into this situation, without consultation, by her devious brother, Aranrhod must depend on her own inner resources. As previously noted, a high value was placed upon a woman's virginity in medieval Welsh society and if such a claim was subsequently proved to be false the *twyllforwyn* or 'false virgin' could suffer public mockery, social isolation and poverty. So Aranrhod answers Math's direct question, 'Are you a virgin?' vaguely – 'That is my belief'[157], separating internal mind from external reality in her reply. But as she undergoes the virginity test and steps over Math's magic rod, she gives birth to a boy and, as she flees for the door, a second boy. Nicole Thomas comments,

> Math's rod functions as a phallic symbol that magically penetrates Aranrhod during the test, seeking to expose the mysteries of her body for the judgement of an authoritative male audience.[158]

Two observations regarding Aranrhod's experience are, firstly, that there are parallels with the medieval experience of marriage, from a woman's perspective. Social expectation resulted in most women going into marriage of some variety, but largely as a pawn in a male game of procreativity, as medieval marriage – including virginity requirements[159] – was a form of control by men of women's reproductive capacity.

In the Fourth Branch Aranrhod is not punished as a *twyllforwyn*, perhaps because, as Nicole Thomas suggests,

> her lie was discovered through the virginity test performed by her uncle, not by a husband on her wedding night, and because she has the financial protection afforded by being an independent landowner.'[160]

Nevertheless, her subsequent isolation at Caer Aranrhod indicates, as Nicole Thomas also comments, that,

> The woman who attempts to act outside her social and maternal role as reproducer of children is relegated to a position outside the social order. [161]

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[157] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007. P. 54

[158]Thomas, N.A. 'The Daughters of Modron: Evangeline Walton's Re-visioning of The Mabinogi' Ph.D. Thesis for Southern New Hampshire University, 2013. P. 128

[159] Kathleen Coyne Kelly says that the virginity test is 'ostensibly about the women who are forced to undergo it [but] is really about the men who insist upon it.' Kelly, C.K. *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000)p. 65

[160] Thomas, N. A. *Ibid.,*pp. 125-6

[161] *Ibid*., p. 140

The second observation concerns the shame felt by Aranrhod after this event – shame which causes her not only to reject Lleu, but to actively endeavour to obstruct his maturation process. Some scholars have suggested that the source of her shame is being discovered a *twyllforwyn*[162] and others suggest incestual overtones in the relationship between Aranrhod and her brother, Gwydion – especially in his paternal role for Lleu.[163] However, there is also the shame attached to the public nature of 'giving birth' in the presence of male observers or, as Valente says (paraphrasing J.K. Bollard), 'the peculiar and humiliating manner of her giving birth.'[164]

Childbirth for medieval women was a dangerous and life-threatening experience. As Lisa Bitel says,

> Pregnancy and childbirth were killers of mothers and babies alike. Complications….may have claimed ten to fifteen percent of women….No matter whether a prospective mother was queen or migrant peasant, she was in danger.[165]

Childbirth was also the realm of women and midwives, as it marked the transition of a soul from the Otherworld (*Annfwn*) to this world. Ruth Padel comments:

> In male perception, a supposed female aptitude for monitoring passage out of or into darkness is linked with a supposed female aptitude for making contact with what is….*hagios* or 'sacred'….cognate with *agos*, 'pollution.' [166]

So childbearing, sacred, secret and dangerous, was intimate to the power of women, and for Aranrhod to deliver her sons in such a public way transgressed all the usual medieval social norms. Her humiliation was complete.

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[162] For example Thomas, N.A. 'The Daughters of Modron: Evangeline Walton's Re-visioning of The Mabinogi' Ph.D. Thesis for Southern New Hampshire University, 2013 p. 230

[163] For example, Green, M. *Celtic Goddesses: Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*. (London: British Museum Press, 1995)p. 58.

[164] Valente, R.L 'Merched Y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986 p. 256 and Bollard, J.K. 'The Structure of the Four Branches of The Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, (1974-5), pp. 267-8. The shame of such a public birth is also the experience of Macha in the Ulster Cycle of Irish Mythologies, who gave birth to twins after being forced to race against the king's horses, and in her dying moments was able to place a curse on the Ulstermen for nine generations because of their 'cruel treatment' of a woman in labour. Heaney, Marie (transl.) *Over Nine Waves: A Book of Irish Legends* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994)pp. 65-68.

[165] Bitel, L. *Women in Early Medieval Europe:* 400-1100. (Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 25

[166]Padel, R. 'Women: Model for Possession by Greek Daemons' in *Images of women in Antiquity* Ed. By Cameron, A. and Kuhrt, A. (London and Canberra: Croomhelm Press, 1983) p. 5

In addition, her shame is reflected literally in the medieval Welsh Laws regarding *galanas* (life-price) and *Sarhaed* (insult price), as Lisa Bitel comments,

> A pregnant woman was worth more than a potentially fertile woman, who was far more valuable than a post-menopausal female. ….Hence, jurists built inequalities based on gender, usually favourable to men but sometimes to child-bearing women, into early medieval societies as an acceptable legal principle.[167]

A woman's worth was directly connected to her procreative potential and marriage was a central aspect of patriarchal control of fertility, as Kelly comments regarding virginity testing and marriage, the aim was 'to create absolutely docile female bodies.'[168]

Aranrhod's resistance to her 'natural role' sets her outside the patriarchal social order. Lloyd-Morgan says, 'She is that dangerous and unsettling phenomenon, the woman who has experience of sex but has not been tamed by wedlock.'[169] Refusing the maternal role into which Gwydion attempts to coerce her, she becomes the unmaternal female who 'violates' her maternal obligations. As Nicole Thomas says,

> She is assigned the role of monster woman….a warning to women that motherhood is the natural role. If you deviate from your culturally defined identity/role – you will, be expelled.[170]

In addition, a cross-gender story evolves in that, although Gwydion fails to fulfil his fraternal (male) obligations by violating his sister's protection and exposing her to shame, yet at the same time he assumes the maternal (female) obligations in his nurturing of Lleu, which Aranrhod has rejected. Here it seems that the Fourth Branch is exploring traditional gender roles in interesting ways – the maternal male, who nevertheless fails to protect his sister - and the unmaternal female, who appears to live an unprotected and independent life. As Valente says, 'she lives independently of male protection, the *domina* of her own retreat, Caer Aranrhod.' [171]

As the drama of the Fourth Branch unfolds there is also an increase in the levels of male attempt at control of the female. Goewin and Aranrhod are subjected to

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[167] Bitel, L. *Women in Early Medieval Europe:* 400-1100. (Cambridge University Press, 2002)p. 70
[168] Kelly, C.K. *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000)p. 79
[169] Lloyd-Morgan, C. 'Gender and Violence in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' in *150 Jahre Mabinogion Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen Buchreihe der Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 19 (2001)p. 71
[170] For example Thomas, N.A. 'The Daughters of Modron: Evangeline Walton's Re-visioning of The Mabinogi' Ph.D. Thesis for Southern New Hampshire University, 2013 p. 240.
[171] Valente, R.L 'Merched Y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986 pp. 259-60

male oppression, leading to a sparky anger in female/male relationships. Partly due to the honourable Math, total female acquiescence is not achieved and so the tale leads us to the ultimate attempt at male control – the woman created by men for men, made to embody all that the medieval male desires in the female. Valente comments:

> Gwydion….will overcome [Aranrhod's] last prohibition without her assistance, taking on the female power of creation one more time, to 'give birth' to Blodeuedd.[172]

In fact in a double irony, Blodeuedd, whose creation is an attempt to by-pass or annul the female power of birthing, is the only female 'birthed' in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi,* but she is not born of a woman.[173]

There are three particular aspects of her marriage to Lleu which reflect some of the nature of medieval marriage.

The **first aspect** is the lack of female autonomy within the marriage. Blodeuedd is created to be a wife, without consultation or opportunity for choice in the matter. The text gives us an image on Blodeuedd 'wandering around the court', lacking stimulation, a lost soul. She sees 'a weary stag….with hounds and huntsmen chasing it'[174] is this a possible picture of a medieval married noblewoman's internal life - weary of the patriarchal hunt, without choice, confined to her roles of wife and mother as life passes her by? Upon sighting Gronw Pebr, Blodeuedd becomes a human individual of real agency, instead of a male appendage, giving orders to the servants, offering hospitality, and experiencing the spark of mutual attraction. Fiona Winward, referring to those who describe Blodeuedd as amoral, says that this may be

> 'a manifestation of her desire for independence. Trapped from birth under the marital authority of Lleu, and the patriarchal, disciplining authority of Gwydion, Blodeuedd seizes the opportunity to have some say in her own fate.'[175]

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[172] Valente, R.L. 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in Math', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 35 (1988), p.342

[173] Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan says 'This is a society dominated and controlled by men. Even the babies and children mentioned are all male. If the women do give birther to daughters, which presumably they must, the texts remain silent….their presence is not considered necessary or of any interest…' Lloyd-Morgan, C. 'Gender and Violence in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' in *150 Jahre Mabinogion Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen Buchreihe der Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 19 (2001)pp. 72-3.

[174] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007). P. 59

[175] Winward, F. 'Some Aspects of the Women in the Four Branches', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* Vol 34: (1997),p. 97

Ironically, though, it is Blodeuedd's very human desire to make her own choices which leads her on to adultery and murder and finally to the loss of her human status. This may be an authorial comment on the need for adherence to one's 'role' in medieval society, and – as Lloyd-Morgan expresses it – the punishment of 'any woman who transgresses the rules….and tries to give priority to her own, female interests.'[176]

However, it also indicates a dual standard in the laws – and this is the **second aspect** of the marriage of Blodeuedd and Lleu which reflects the nature of medieval marriage. For example, Gwydion, who was involved in the rape of a virgin (causing battle and death in the process) and exposed his sister to shame, does not suffer as severe a punishment as Blodeuedd. The message is clear – the social rules are unequal in terms of gender.

For example, as Morfydd E. Owen says,

> In all societies the roles of men and women imply different modes of conduct for each sex. A woman….is dishonoured by the tainting of her sexual purity, whereas a man is not….A woman is obliged to preserve her purity, which has a physical basis, whereas a man is obliged to defend his kin, which includes the protection and restraint of the woman dependent on him.[177]

Within marriage it can only be assumed that such double standards could lead to obvious relationship difficulties. R.R. Davies says of Welsh Medieval marriage,

> Prior to a marital union, the husband expected, indeed demanded, his partner to be a wise and careful virgin. Likewise within marriage, Welsh Law insists on a high standard of marital behaviour: for a wife even to kiss another man was a serious offence….[178]

However, men often had offspring from other unions as indicated by the Welsh Law which permitted a man's wife to 'injure or even kill her husband's *cywyres* (mistress) with her two hands, and remain free from having to make any compensatory payments.'[179] Such a Law would also infer that women were set against other women in such situations, to the benefit of neither. The 'one rule for male, one rule for female' inequality was clearly an integral part of Medieval Welsh marriage.

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[176] loyd-Morgan, Ceridwen, 'Gender and Violence in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' in *150 Jahre Mabinogion Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen Buchreihe der Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 19 (2001. p. 72

[177] *The Welsh Law of Women* Ed. And Transl. by D. Jenkins and M.E. Owens (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980)p. 45.

[178] *Ibid.,*p. 106.

[179] *Ibid.,* p. 21

The third aspect of the marriage of Blodeuedd's marriage to Lleu, which reflects some of the nature of medieval marriage, is inter-linked with the first and second in terms of the status of women within marriage.

Blodeuedd is an obvious example of an ideally virginal and beautiful woman from a male perspective -

> 'Then [Math and Gwydion] took the flowers of the oak, and the flowers of the broom, and the flowers of the meadowsweet, and from those they conjured up the fairest and most beautiful maiden that anyone had ever see. And they baptised her in the way they did at that time, and named her Blodeuedd.' [180]

As Sioned Davies notes,

> the yellow broom is often used as a metaphor when describing a maiden's hair….The flowers of the oak and the meadowsweet are both white, a colour not only associated with ideal female beauty, but also with purity.[181]

However, as a woman created to be a wife, Blodeuedd is limited to one aspect of her nature, namely procreation, and as such she is reduced to a soul-less, one-dimensional existence, focused on the body. As Nicole Thomas comments, 'limiting female identity to her maternal function effectively results in the social servitude of women in a gender economy controlled by men.'[182]

Initially Blodeuedd is described as the ideal woman, but gradually, as the tale unfolds into deception and adultery, Blodeuedd is portrayed very differently – deceiving, unfaithful, disloyal, wilful and lustful. These represent a list of the negative traits perceived by men to be in women, according to some medieval writings. For example, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) described women as promiscuous, controlling, gold-digging and deceptive[183], whereas Christine de Pizan (1365-c.1430), in defence of women wrote, 'Woman's nature is noble, very compassionate….humble, gentle, self-effacing….devout and quietly modest….This is the female character, which clearly stems from her nature.'[184]

Yet in The Fourth Branch it is Lleu who is portrayed with such a 'feminine nature' – honest, faithful and innocent, to the point of naivety. It is almost as if what

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[180] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007).p. 58
[181] Ibid., p. 243
[182] For example Thomas, N.A. 'The Daughters of Modron: Evangeline Walton's Re-visioning of The Mabinogi' Ph.D. Thesis for Southern New Hampshire University, 2013 p. 141
[183] From Il Corbaccio in Alcuin Blamires (Ed.) *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)pp.166-176.
[184] From *L'Epistre Au Dieu D'Amours Ibid*., p. 285

contemporary psychologists call 'Transference' – relationship illusion - is being enacted in the gender portrayals of the Fourth Branch - as the social 'rules', unequal to begin with, are manipulated and transgressed. As if the fundamental inequalities of the social rules, which set the scene for male domination and female subjugation, must inevitably lead to 'skewed' perceptions in terms of gender and social roles.

As Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan says, 'In this society…. violence against women…. is used as an instrument to protect the existing social order, and to punish any woman who transgresses the rules of that order….'[185] And, as portrayed in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi,* medieval marriage was an intricate part of the mechanism of social control.

In conclusion, the marriage of Lleu and Blodeuedd was inevitably short and unfruitful, with both being changed forever in shape-shifting consequences – which was sometimes portrayed in Celtic mythology as a form of death, representing the end of one way of being. It is interesting to note, though, that Lleu is enabled to return to his human nature, assisted, as always, by Gwydion. And later he is able to find justice by the killing of Gronw Pebr, who agrees that 'it was through the deceit of a woman that I did to you what I did'[186] – all men together against the 'evil' woman. Whereas Blodeuwedd, their 'creation', is condemned to remain a creature of the night, subject to hostility, striking and molestation – experiences all too common, as we have seen, in the tales of the married women of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi.*

There is also an implication in the Fourth Branch – in the connection between Aranrhod and Blodeuedd – that if Aranrhod had fulfilled her social obligations there would have been no need for Blodeuedd. In other words, if one woman steps out of line it has serious social implications, not just for men, but for other women.

The tale concludes with both Aranrhod and Lleu, living individually in perpetual isolation in their respective separate dwellings. Such an image of social fragmentation starkly contrasts with any portrayal of marriage as the union of male and female underpinning social cohesion.

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[185] [185] Lloyd-Morgan, C., 'Gender and Violence in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' in *150 Jahre Mabinogion Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen Buchreihe der Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 19 (2001) pp67-78.. p. 72

[186] *The Mabinogion*. Transl. and notes by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, 2007)p. 64

Conclusion

In conclusion we return to the question posed at the beginning of this thesis – 'why is it that marriage generally seems to have a negative impact upon the women of The Four Branches, in terms of their individuality, agency and independence?'

In exploring women and marriage in the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* we have seen some examples of relationships which seemed to work, such as Teyrnon Twrf Liant and his wife in the First Branch, for whom marriage seemed to involve companionship, positive communication and mutual respect. However, for the most part it is clear that marriage for the women of The Four Branches was a challenging experience, requiring total acquiescence to the rules and roles of the social system.

The negative impact of marriage for women is represented by the vulnerability of their position between two kins – their birth family and the family into which they married. In addition, limited to one aspect of their female identity, namely procreation, women were socially restricted and constrained. This is represented, for example, in the *galanas* (life-price) of a woman, which diminished in accordance with her fertility potential. Women were without social autonomy and therefore at the mercy of powerful social forces, dependent for their security and well-being upon the protection of male honour. This 'protection' could potentially represent companionship, but it could also represent control and even violence – as it did in the marriage of Branwen to Matholwch.

So, the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* contain a variety of marriage experiences. Here are married women who rebelled against the rules, who abided by the rules, who were raped and violated, calumniated wives who courageously spoke out about injustices against them – sometimes using extraordinary methods to be heard – married women with traits of wisdom, insight, nurture, determination and courage – as well as being unfaithful,

unmaternal, acquiescent, strident, angry and deceitful – the full range of human emotion and experience. In fact, as Valente comments:

> *The Mabinogi* elaborates on details of codes and laws in a fuller way than the legal texts themselves do. Here we see, not only the limitations of women's actions, but also the repercussions of those constraints in the lives of women and men….The shaping force of the stories of *The Mabinogi* is a concern with social order as opposed to debilitating chaos.[187]

However, having particularly researched 'women and marriage in *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi'*, I would, in conclusion, take issue with Valente on one particular aspect of her argument, in terms of the 'social order' to which she refers. As metioned previously, Valente, and some others,[188] have suggested that social codes and legal obligations are the back-drop to the dramas of The Four Branches and that when women and men adhere to these, social chaos is avoided. For example, Valente also says,

> Where the women are faithful to their responsibilities and where men respect their powers, the social group finds stability and just resolutions to unexpected difficulties or decisions.[189]

However, I would argue that because the 'social order'. to which Valente refers, does not always include a concern for 'social justice' – certainly in terms of the female characters – ultimately there can be no real or lasting social stability. Women cannot be faithful to 'their responsibilities' in such a society, dominated and controlled by men, unless they collude in their own diminishment, operating as they are within the confinements of the 'cage' of medieval law and custom, itself rooted in patriarchy.

At the heart of the problem is the fact that the social status of medieval women at every stage of their lives is always defined in relation to men. A woman was a father's daughter, a brother's sister, a husband's wife, a son's mother, with her *galanas* (life-price and personal worth) literally calculated according to the status of her nearest male kin and her potential for fertility.

In the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* married women such as Rhiannon are, on the one hand, represented with sovereignty goddess undertones, holding the power of the validation of Kingship. Yet, on the other hand, they are also 'liminal' monsters, capable of

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[187] Valente, R.L 'Merched Y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986, pp. 94 and 103.

[188] For example, Bollard, J.K. 'The Structure of the Four Branches of The Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, (1974-5), pp. 250

[189] *Ibid.,* P. 283

infanticide and requiring punishment to remind them of their inferiority in the social hierarchy.

So, although it could be argued that a woman's fertility could have been a source of power for women as the particular realm and gift of the feminine – the power of birth and re-birth represented by the sovereignty goddess - nevertheless, ultimately it seems to me that there is no real indication, at least in the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi,* that the sovereignty goddess myth had any real 'equalising' impact upon the lives of medieval women. As Lisa Bitel says:

> Christianity has not prevented the oppression of women, so there is no reason to conclude that Germanic and Celtic conceptions of a feminine landscape did so either. To associate women with a healing spring was beneficial to women and all things female; to link barren women with a land that failed to produce, starving whole villages, was not. Ultimately, the language of sacred landscapes had little to do with the length and quality of women's lives at the beginning of the Middle Ages. [190]

In addition, in a Christianised and patriarchal medieval society, such power could also be perceived as a threat to male authority in terms of lineage and inheritance – as Mary Condren says,

> Inherent in patriarchal ideology is a commitment to the suppression and control of women in the religious, physiological, social and political aspects of their existence. Most importantly, women's sexuality, containing as it did the potential for men's immortality through the children who would bear their names and inherit their property, would have to be controlled in the future by every force patriarchy could muster. [191]

Women had to be 'protected' (controlled) by men at every stage of their lives, and it would seem that in the tales of The Four Branches medieval marriage was a central part of this picture.

At the root of the inequality was – as discussed in chapter one of this thesis – a perception of women as inferior to men, as Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan says, 'At the root of their inferior status lies the fact that the man is taken as the norm, as the basic unit of

[190] Bitel, L. *Women in Early Medieval Europe:* 400-1100. (Cambridge University Press, 2002) p.45
[191] Condren, M. *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1989) p.40

society.'[192] Lisa Bitel explains the social repercussions of this in terms of the experience of women in medieval Europe:

> The legal standard remained the free adult male, for whom women existed in relation and by comparison. Adult freemen were the actors in public life, moving through public places, with powers over persons to negotiate, bargain, make transactions, sue, and right legal wrongs by negotiation or violence. Females were to be protected, secured, bartered, and exchanged.[193]

This is the social situation at the heart of the tales of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi.* Against this backdrop the drama of the tales is played out, with male and female characters allocated their particular roles. So, while Valente speaks of the 'requirement to be subject to the codified rules of the social group. Conflict arises from attempts to bend or break the rules'[194] - it is also true that the laws themselves contain a double standard, with the result that one gender is clearly set up to fail more often.

For example, Aranrhod is socially isolated, Blodeuedd is dehumanised and even Branwen, the woman who seems to fulfil all social obligations completely, is annihilated. Only Rhiannon survives to see the marriage of her son[195], but only because she is linked to fairly honourable men – Pwyll, Pryderi and Manawydan. It is also the case that the women in these stories are mainly noblewomen – the experience of ordinary married women in medieval society was presumably much worse.

In such a pre-judged society married women could only exist within the limits allowed, were dependent on the honour of the men closest to them and were sometimes complicit with those men in the accusation and condemnation of other women.[196] The message is that if one woman steps out of line it has implications for others (e.g. Aranrhod and Blodeuedd).

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[192] Lloyd-Morgan, C. 'Gender and Violence in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi' in *150 Jahre Mabinogion Deutsch-Walisische Kulturbeziehungen Buchreihe der Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 19 (2001) pp67-78. (p.75). See also Chapter one of this thesis, footnote 22.

[193]Bitel, L. *Women in Early Medieval Europe:* 400-1100. (Cambridge University Press, 2002) p.73

[194] Valente, R.L 'Merched Y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986, p. 89

[195] The children of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, all male, seem also to be blighted in that only Pryderi survives to marry.

[196] For example, Rhiannon's servants in the First Branch and the wife of Llwyd cil Coed in the Third Branch.

Ultimately the stories of, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi,* although filled with colourful and resourceful female characters, reveal that medieval marriage for women, rooted as it was in the Laws of Hywel Dda, was an 'unequal yoke.'

However, in conclusion, it also needs to be noted that we do not know exactly to what extent the laws were strictly adhered to in reality, because of the lack of court rolls etc. relating to Wales (as mentioned in chapter one of this thesis). Indeed, according to Gwyneth Richards, there is evidence to suggest that some medieval women, particularly noblewomen, were overtly active in ensuring that their rights were enforced and their privileges protected and therefore were not at all marginal to medieval social life.[197] In addition, we have noted some seemingly positive examples of companionable marriages in the stories of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, such as the marriage of Teyrnon and his wife and the marriage of Rhiannon to Manawydan. Marriage was clearly not a totally negative experience, even for the women of *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinog,* and indeed we cannot impose twenty-first century individualism and feminism on medieval literature and culture.

However, we can agree with Valente, in terms of marriage and social harmony in any culture, that 'the successful social group is the one that respects both male and female power and knowledge.'[198]

[197] Gwenyth Richards says that 'Through the family women were able to exercise respectable forms of power such as influence, and through family networking they could take advantage of opportunities for individual agency.' However, she also admits that 'the women who wielded the most power in Wales were widows.' Richards, G. *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century: An Historical Study of Medieval Welsh Law and Gender Roles*. (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd., 2009) p.17.

[198] Valente, R.L 'Merched Y Mabinogi: Women and the Thematic Structure of The Four Branches.' Ph.D. thesis for the University of Cornell, 1986, p. 291

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