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***Y MABINOGI*: DREAMS OF UNIFICATION AND THE IMAGINED PAST OF
WALES**

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***Y MABINOGI: DREAMS OF UNIFICATION AND THE IMAGINED PAST OF
WALES***

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*Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.
Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often, in our art, the
art of words.*

Ursula K. Le Guin, **2014 National Book Awards**

RESUMO

A presente dissertação apresenta uma leitura de *O Mabinogion* – compilação do século XII de contos originalmente escritos em galês médio – com o objetivo de verificar de que maneiras a obra pode ter influenciado o desenvolvimento da cultura e literatura galesa durante a Idade Média. Esta pesquisa investiga como a narrativa de *O Mabinogion* é permeada pela complexa composição política dos diferentes grupos do País de Gales durante a Baixa Idade Média. Como apoio teórico para referenciar conceitos relacionados ao campo dos Estudos Culturais, são utilizados textos variados de Stuart Hall e também o livro *Pós-colonialismo Revisitado*, de Kirsti Bohata, autora que defende que Gales historicamente detém conexões complexas com a Inglaterra. Bohata propõe uma revisão de certos entendimentos históricos, e afirma que os discursos de subjugação e marginalização estavam presentes em períodos anteriores àqueles tradicionalmente reconhecidos como o imperialismo, a colonização e o mercantilismo. Para a autora, "em termos de memória galesa, pelo menos, discursos de dominação e perda, de imperialismo cultural, resistência e cumplicidade podem ser traçados a partir do poema de Aneurin sobre a derrota em Catraeth [do século VI]" (BOHATA, 2004, p. 8). À luz dessas declarações, são discutidos os Quatro Ramos de *O Mabinogion* em relação às lutas políticas e dinâmicas de poder entre a Inglaterra e o País de Gales, ocorridas durante o tempo em que as histórias foram escritas. Essas quatro narrativas, que constituem a seção mais antiga de *O Mabinogion*, são distintamente agrupadas no que os estudiosos chamam de "ramos" porque terminam com a frase: "E assim termina este ramo de *O Mabinogion*". Elas também são tematicamente separadas dos outros sete contos de *O Mabinogion* por retratarem personagens do folclore galês que não pertencem às Lendas Arturianas. A dissertação se estrutura em três capítulos. O primeiro explora o contexto político em que os contos de *O Mabinogion* foram escritos pela primeira vez e revisa o pano de fundo da primeira tradução desses manuscritos para o inglês, ocorrida no século XIX, durante a Era Vitoriana. O segundo capítulo comenta o Primeiro e o Terceiro ramos de *O Mabinogion*, explorando como os contos retratam as lutas políticas entre os líderes galeses. O terceiro capítulo, por fim, analisa o Segundo e o Quarto ramos, examinando como são retratadas personagens que estão na fronteira entre dois reinos – geográficos ou simbólicos –, analisando como se relacionam com a posição política de Gales em oposição a outros povos. Através do modo como são retratadas figuras heroicas e aventureiras e a descrição da terra galesa, pode-se concluir que esses textos constituem um registro da unidade cultural de um povo, seu modo de vida, história e padrões narrativos. Os textos harmonizam elementos galeses com aspectos de outras literaturas europeias, o que sugere que retratam uma cultura e processo de formação a partir de sua identidade coletiva.

Palavras-chave: Estudos culturais. Literatura galesa. *O Mabinogion*. Identidade nacional.

ABSTRACT

This Master's thesis presents a reading of the *Y Mabinogi* – a 12th century compilation of tales originally written in Middle Welsh – to verify in what ways this work may have contributed, during the Middle Ages, to the development of Welsh culture and literature. The research analyzes the ways in which the narrative within *Y Mabinogi* is pervaded by the complex political positions of the different groups dwelling in Wales during the High Middle Ages. In order to support this discussion, the works of Stuart Hall will be cited to aid in the definition of concepts related to the field of Cultural Studies. The critique of Kirsti Bohata in the book *Postcolonialism Revisited* also aids in the theoretical support of this thesis; as the author argues, Wales historically holds complex connections with England. The critic proposes a review of certain historical understandings, and declares that discourses of subjugation and marginalization were present prior to the traditionally recognized eras of imperialism, colonization, and mercantilism; to Bohata, “in terms of Welsh memory at least, discourses of domination and loss, of cultural imperialism, resistance and complicity may be traced from Aneurin's poem about the defeat at Catraeth [from the 6th century]” (2004, p. 8). In light of those statements, The Four Branches of *Y Mabinogi* are discussed, in relation to the political struggles and power dynamics between England and Wales during the time in which they were written. These four tales constitute the oldest section of *Y Mabinogi*; they are distinctively grouped into what scholars call “branches” due to their all ending with the similar line: “And so ends this branch of the *Mabinogi*”. They are also thematically separated from the other seven tales in the *Mabinogi*, as they portray characters of Welsh folklore which do not appear in Arthurian Legends. This research work is structured in three chapters. The first explores the political context in which the tales of *Y Mabinogi* were first written; then, it reviews the background for the first English translation of those manuscripts, which took place in the nineteenth century, during the Victorian Era. The second chapter goes over the First and Third Branches of *Y Mabinogi*, exploring how those tales portray the political struggles between Welsh leaders. Finally, the third section analyses the Second and Fourth Branches, examining their portrayal of characters who stand at the border between two realms – geographical or symbolical –, enquiring after how those relate to the political stance of Wales in opposition to other peoples. Through elements such as the portrayal of heroic figures and adventurers, and the description of Welsh land, it may be possible to conclude that these texts sought to register the cultural unity of a people, their way of life, history and narrative patterns. The texts harmonize Welsh elements with aspects of other European literatures, which might suggest that they portray a culture coming to terms with its collective identity.

Keywords: Cultural Studies. Welsh Literature. *Y Mabinogi*. National identity.

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INTRODUCTION

To step into the strange world of *Y Mabinogi* is a journey; I have walked into it, moving through time in a search for the origin of the fantastical, adventurous stories of King Arthur and his knights, which have accompanied me throughout my life. For the last five years, my research has been centered on finding the earliest mentions of King Arthur in literature; that path led me to the twelfth century works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and further, to the origins of Merlin in medieval Welsh manuscripts. In exploring the turbulent political environment which propelled these characters into the broader European literary tradition, I came across the set of tales that is now known as *Y Mabinogi*.

Although these tales have been available in the English language since the nineteenth century (when they were first translated from Welsh), they had been unknown to me until 2019, in the early stages of this research. Moreover, my experience with fellow Brazilian scholars – in reading published critical articles, conversations I have had with colleagues, and feedback from undergraduate students about lectures I have delivered – indicates that *Y Mabinogi* is a fairly obscure *corpus* within my community. I have wondered what the reasons for that might be – and further, reflected on why Welsh literature seems to be explored less frequently than Irish and Scottish literature, when those share many similarities.

The scholarship dedicated to the study of *Y Mabinogi* is vast; with this work, I seek to contribute to the field of research concerning Welsh literature. Throughout this analysis, I aim at understanding how these literary texts may have helped to create a sense of community to the medieval Welsh peoples, who faced invasion from the Normans. Through the study of literary narrative in relation to the social and political context in which they were created, I intend to analyze how literature may have aided in the development of a common imaginary past for the Welsh peoples – and further, how these narratives might have contributed to the alliances between the different kingdoms of that region, thus being an essential part of the construction of Wales as a political unity.

It is usual for critics to interpret medieval Welsh literature, particularly the native tales and the three Welsh romances contained within *Y Mabinogi*, as an attempt to create a

shared past to the Welsh peoples with the objective of bringing those groups into a coherent, homogeneous kingdom. With this thesis, I will take on a similar approach but focusing instead on the study of the unique group of tales within *Y Mabinogi* we have come to know as the Four Branches. Therefore, this research seeks to discover how *Y Mabinogi* aided in the development of Welsh collective identity; this study also inquires after the ways through which literary narratives contribute to a group's understanding of itself. Beyond that, it is interesting to inquire after reasons behind such need for a common Welsh past. I argue that the tales in the Four Branches of *Y Mabinogi* could be an expression of the political turmoil of its time, and reminiscent of the reigns of King Llewelyn ap Iorweth (c. 1194–1240 AD) and his grandson, King Llewelyn ap Gruffyd (1247–1282 AD). It is currently widely accepted among critics that these stories are much earlier than the manuscripts in which they are recorded (*The Red Book of Hergest* and *The White Book of Rhydderch*), which date from some period between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. This affirmation is supported by Sioned Davies (2007) and Alan Lupack (2007) and will be further explored in the next sections of this work.

The political turmoil I refer to was caused mainly by struggles for territory; throughout the High and Late Middle Ages, Wales was riddled with both internal and external conflicts. The first section of this thesis further details the different leaderships and groups within Wales who at times sought to overpower and incorporate one another. During the Early Middle Ages, the Welsh were hardly a cohesive group, with independent leaders who held different territories; that would begin to change with the Norman invasion in Britain, which started in the eleventh century. This first chapter explores how this event destabilized and affected the political landscape of Wales, and how the arrival of an outside people essentially drove Welsh culture into creating a separation between themselves and the Normans. This first chapter then focuses on the policies employed by King Llewelyn ap Iorweth and King Llewelyn ap Gruffydd to circumvent the Norman attempts to annex Wales to England by establishing themselves as the native leaders of Wales as a whole.

One of the main strategies of resistance for these Welsh rulers was to develop a written legal system to cement and register the customs of medieval Wales; these laws also presented a narrativization of the past, recalling an idealized Wales where the independent regions would gather under one Welsh leader, and were made stronger through such alliance. The legal code was centered on the figure of a Welsh ruler who lived in the 10th century and who at one time held a great portion of the territory; the full unification of Wales which

these laws praise, however, had never been achieved in practice. Nevertheless, Llewelyn ap Iorweth and Llewelyn ap Gruffydd relied on this fictionalized past to forward their plans for the future of Wales. This thesis, then, discusses how *Y Mabinogi* presents some narrative themes which are linked to the policies of cultural resistance employed by these native leaders: a call for unity, loyalty, and alliances, while cautioning against the peoples who lie outside the boundaries of Wales. Then, I seek to explore how this call for unity is expressed in the literary narrative, and what are the wider implications of *Y Mabinogi* to the construction of Welsh cultural identity.

In order to achieve that, this research looks at *Y Mabinogi* from the perspective of Cultural Studies. Ever since historian Robert Rees Davies published several studies concerning the patterns of domination and conquest utilized by the Normans in Wales throughout the Middle Ages, identifying distinctly imperialistic practices, a great amount of history scholars and literary critics have followed in a similar line of thought. Kirsti Bohata (2004) is one such literary critic whose analysis demonstrates that the material, political, emotional and ideological motives behind domination and conquest have been present since a much earlier period than the European overseas mercantilism and imperialism. Bohata's work adds to this thesis through its questioning the Anglocentricity of the label "British", and through its reflections about the dynamic between Wales and England, which challenge the traditional understanding of imperialistic patterns. The critic argues that the Welsh have been historically placed under the larger "British" identity, but have also been portrayed as less intellectual or evolved than the English in attempts to justify their oppression.

Historian Roger Turvey, for instance, notes that in the Norman perspective, "Wales was regarded as a frontier country, or March, as poor and unattractive a land as he might care to find west of the rich fertile plains of the English lowlands" (TURVEY, 2002, p. 40). Throughout the period of AD 1000-1250 (denominated as the High Middle Ages) several political measures were imposed onto Welsh territory, as the control over the fertile lands of the south and east were granted to foreign lords, loyal to the Norman dynasty. Although this was not always achieved only by military means, the displacement of Welsh people from those areas at the frontier with England irrevocably changed the Welsh political, cultural, and economic configuration. These events had long lasting implications, reaching beyond the time period selected for this research; it is worth mentioning that in 16th century, King Henry VIII legally annexed Wales to English territory, and prevented Welsh speaking people from taking public office in Wales.

Moreover, linguistic policies imposed on the Welsh school curriculum during the 20th century – which constructed the Welsh language as inferior to English – vastly contributed to the decline of the native language; such intent was made explicit by government representatives, which evaluated education as the most effective method of control (BOHATA, 2004). All the aforementioned acts had a lasting impact on Welsh cultural identity: in short, “from the 13th century onwards, Wales was subjected to a series of events and social upheaval, with an imposition of English laws, language and culture that national identity has been mutated, possibly beyond recognition” (FEAR, 2016, p. 13). Therefore, although Wales was never declared as an official English colony – and certainly held a more favorable position under the ambivalent label of “British” than other nations oppressed by English rule and imperialism – Welsh literature demonstrates a clear feeling of otherness characteristic of people who have been invaded and alienated from their own culture and place. Considering that these processes originate in the Middle Ages, it is fitting to analyze the literature produced under such political context through the lens of Cultural Studies. The specific theoretical concepts drawn from this field of study will be further detailed in the third section of the first chapter.

The *corpus* of the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi* (*Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi*) is discussed in two chapters: chapter two focuses on the tales of “Pwyll Prince of Dyfed” and of “Manawydan son of Llŷr”, the First and Third Branches respectively. Chapter three is centered on the Second and Fourth Branches, named “Branwen Daughter of Llŷr” and “Math, Son of Mathowny”. The First and Third Branches are grouped for their similar themes, which approach the conflicts among the Welsh leaders and the nuanced relations with the leaders of the eastern border; these tales display the processing of cultural changes due to the interaction with another people in a frontier space. The action is centered on maintaining, defining, or regaining territory – as the geographical locations with fluid boundaries are often the stage to dangerous supernatural encounters. Both tales take place in Dyfed, close to the borderland region denominated in the Middle Ages as the Welsh Marches. This place and the political context of the area are significant to the narrative construction of The First and Third Branches.

Chapter three turns to the Second and Fourth Branches, which again deal with similar subjects; here, however, the focus lies on the ambiguous position of certain characters that are narratively placed on the threshold between two cultures. These tales explore this precarious middle position, its dangers, and how to avoid them. Under this tile, I also discuss

the inner conflicts among the Welsh, this time from the perspective of Gwynedd – the metaphorical center of *pura Wallia*, the northern and western regions of Wales, which serve as background to the tales of Branwen and Math. Next, this chapter debates how the narratives of the Second and Fourth Branches approach authority, language, and physical bodies in relation to the Welsh cultural identity. Those aspects all seem to be connected to an inquiry after the development of culture and collective identity in face of the rapidly changing politics, geographical boundaries, customs and language.

In Bohata's words, the outline of Welsh identity "has focused on resisting the cultural imperialism of England, with political autonomy regarded as a means to securing and protecting Welsh cultural difference" (2004, p. 9). Thus, this research examines the layers of meaning constructed through the narratives of the Four Branches, and how they relate to the creation of a united identity for Wales through fictional, written text. These tales are complete with references to geographical locations, medieval laws and costumes, and other literary tales, many of which have been long lost – making this work of literature both challenging and wonderful to untangle. Across all the Four Branches, a call for alliances and unification underlies the characters' adventures – a message which strongly resembles the policies of the two most prominent native leaders of the High Middle Ages. Now, it is worth exploring how those stories attempted to mold the future of Wales after the portrayal of an imagined, ideal past.

1 CONTEXTUALIZATION

When working with a *corpus* so far removed from the 21st century, it was necessary for me to investigate the history which saw the birth of these stories. In this first section, I will report on the political landscape of Wales during a part of the Middle Ages – and consequently, comment on the factors that led to the current understanding of Wales as a single geographical, cultural, and political unity. Then, I seek briefly to describe *Y Mabinogi* as a whole; I will go over some of the history of this literary text and how it reached our time. I will also comment on aspects of the other tales that might be relevant to the understanding of the selected texts analyzed throughout this thesis.

1.1 The Political Environment in Medieval Wales (11th to 14th century)

The Middle Ages consist of a wide time frame which has been revisited by contemporary scholars who attempt to cast a look upon the events of that period, questioning historical narratives and trying to reinterpret them through the lens of theories developed during the 20th and 21st centuries. In this section I will explore some events which occurred between the 11th and 14th centuries, keeping the main focus on the attempts of Welsh unification and the relations between the rulers in Wales and the Norman dynasty. At this time, the tales of *Y Mabinogi* were already circulating in Wales through oral culture; several sources indicate that the material within *Y Mabinogi* existed long before they were first written down, between the late eleventh and early fourteenth centuries. However, the territory I refer to as Wales was, at that point, far from a cohesive group. Rather, according to Patricia Skinner (2007), there was no central political unity in Wales during the Early and High Middle Ages. That understanding would only come in the thirteenth century, with the creation of the Welsh principality. This event, along with the opposition to the Norman Conquest, was what “gave a semblance of political unity, but only so long as it suited the new rulers to maintain this fiction” (SKINNER, 2018, p. 2-3). The use of the word “fiction” by Skinner (2018) is interesting because it implies that cultural identities are established through a narrative that, although it must be generally agreed upon, remains a discursive

fabrication. Such statement raises the argument which I intend to develop in the present thesis: the idea of Wales as a kingdom, and later nation, was shaped by, and created through literature.

Sioned Davies (2007) describes the fragmented political environment of early medieval Wales. Instead of one centralized government, four major regions prevailed: Gwynedd, to the north-west, Powys in central Wales, Deheubarth to the south-west, and Morgannwg to the south-east. These were governed by independent princes who fought among themselves for supremacy over the territories (S. DAVIES, 2007). In the book *The Welsh Princes*, Roger Turvey (2002) comments that the southern kingdoms originated on the eighth and tenth centuries respectively, and thus were much more recent than Gwynedd and Powys, which had been founded at the end of the Roman occupation in Great Britain. By the eleventh century, Morgannwg had dissolved, and by the start of the thirteenth century, Gwynedd dominated the Welsh political scene. Many smaller kingdoms emerged and disappeared during this period, as they were slowly incorporated into their larger neighbouring kingdoms – or had otherwise been defeated by the invading Normans after 1066 (TURVEY, 2002). Among these lesser principalities, there were Brycheiniog, Gwynllwg, Dyfed, and Gwent; the latter two are mentioned by name in the Four Branches of *Y Mabinogi*.

David Stephenson (2019) makes relevant observations about the political organization of the principalities in medieval Wales. The historian describes that the idea of what constituted Wales changed throughout the Early and High Middle Ages. The geographical notion already existed – to a certain extent, with similar boundaries to the ones which exist today – and was acknowledged by literary authors such as Gerald of Wales. However, other political entities held individual power that was perhaps more prominent than that of Wales as a unity. The kingdom of Gwynedd in the north, for example, sought to expand its domain over other territories within Wales. The rulers of Powys, Deheubarth, and – after the arrival of the Normans – the lords of the region called the Welsh Marches, all had influence over the local politics and held the allegiances of their communities (STEPHENSON, 2019). Further, Turvey (2002) explains that the leaders of these individual political unities were, for the most part, engaged in constant political and military conflict, each seeking to overpower their neighbors. Gwynedd, in particular, attempted to expand its borders in order to annex nearby territories: an act that has been deemed by scholars as an

“imperial” ambition within Wales. In regards of these competitions among Welsh principalities, Roger Turvey comments that,

Arguably, it is not until the thirteenth century that there developed any real sense of a ‘Wales’, a Cymric nation of linguistically and culturally like-minded people who shared a common heritage. Whether it was due to a maturing self-awareness of themselves as a people alone that united the Welsh or simply the deepening of the shared experience of their being threatened from without, by Anglo-Norman lords and English kings, is open to debate. On the other hand, it was, in part, a Wales manufactured by war, fashioned by the ambitions of a ruler bent on uniting under his command the territories of his dissident Cymric neighbours whom he sought to make his vassals. (TURVEY, 2002, p. 3)

Thus, it is important to emphasize the notion that Wales as a cohesive cultural unity was a fabrication. Prior to the Norman invasion, only four native rulers had been able to extend their power over a considerable amount of land in Wales; they were called Rhodri Mawr (deceased in 878), Gruffudd ap Llewelyn (deceased in 1064), Hywel Dda (deceased in 950), and Maredudd ab Owain (deceased in 999) – the first two hailing from Gwynedd and the latter two from Deheubarth. Still, in the case of these leaders, their deaths would result in the plans of unification for Wales falling short. One can easily affirm, then, that in the ages prior to the 11th century, the natives of Wales saw themselves as the people of Gwynedd, Powys, or Deheubarth – far from a homogeneous group (ARONSTEIN, 2005). Turvey (2002) points to a few elements, such as the gradual increase of self-awareness of the Welsh as a group and common experience of being invaded by the Normans, as some possible causes for the increasing feeling of unity. Beyond that, the critic suggests that one leader has great influence over the unification of Wales: the prince of Gwynedd, Llewelyn ap Iorwerth. In Turvey’s view, the peoples of Wales came together both through the realization that they all suffered similar oppression under foreign incursions and through the politics of Llewelyn ap Iorwerth, which subdued fellow native rulers and established alliances with the Norman kings.

The arrival of the Normans to Great Britain in 1066 should be further detailed in this text in order to debate the different factors which contributed to the unification of Wales – and how that is reflected on the narrative of *Y Mabinogi*. After landing on the coasts of Britain, King William I of England – known thereafter as William the Conqueror – had no interest in expanding towards the west, dealing at first with the Anglo-Saxon peoples which he encountered. The political landscape in Wales then was a recently broken down land, as

the death of Gruffudd ap Llewelyn in 1064 resulted in a separation of the regions which were once part of his wide domain – and thus, several conflicts emerged between the new leaders and Gruffudd’s sons. It was by 1081 that William I sought to consolidate the borders between his newly acquired territory and Wales; the monarch did so by giving lands along the frontier – Hereford and Shrewsbury – to some of his most loyal followers. According to John Davies (2007, p. 145), William I did not openly encourage these appointed barons to antagonize the Welsh, but did not forbid them to do so. Those events led to the local peoples retreating west, and soon the Eastern region of Wales became an area dominated by Norman barons, as lordships were installed in order to assert and execute law according to their standards – which meant that they would held control over the borders.

The political system installed by the Normans was feudalism – which, in brief words, entails in the rule of one sole male monarch and vassals who owe him their allegiance; then, these Norman expeditors consolidated their place by constructing castles as they moved into Welsh territory, while prohibiting locals to construct their own, which inevitably altered the power structures within that region (TURVEY, 2002) and effectively imposed English law over Welsh territory. These castles were constructed Chepstow, Monmouth and Caerleon, and by 1086, these seats of power had aided in extinguishing the Welsh kingdom of Gwent, which had endured for almost seven hundred years (J. DAVIES, 2007). These stone castles, armored and mounted knights which were of Norman origin were displays of military strength that aided in controlling the region. Furthermore, some Welsh leaders, such as Rhys ap Tewdwr of Deheubarth, were acknowledged as rulers of their territory as long as they would pay annual tribute to the king of England, as it was done by the Norman barons; meanwhile, Gruffydd ap Cynan (c.1055-1137) of the House of Aberffraw in Gwynedd was imprisoned for twelve years and had his lands partly absorbed into the earldom of Chester (J. DAVIES, 2007). Gruffydd ap Cynan offered constant resistance to the Norman settlers, and upon being released, fought to regain his kingdom; from 1118 onwards, the ruler sought to extend the borders of his territory by advancing onto Powys, taking advantage of the inner conflicts in that region – another testament to Gwynedd’s ambitions of ruling over Wales.

Norman domination, however, was not always imposed through martial power. Robert Rees Davies (1990) analyses the Norman control of Welsh territory, observing that the early stages of conquest relied heavily on alliances and friendship with the native leaders rather than on military prowess. Nevertheless, the Normans held a clear intent of not “being regarded merely as partners or as equals” (R. DAVIES, 1990, p. 56). The Normans looked

for acknowledgement of Welsh submission, which would be achieved through the exchange of gifts and surrendering of hostages. R. Davies (1990) describes how King Henry II invited Irish and Welsh leaders to dine in his hall, offering them prestigious seats; these interactions sought to harness the native sympathies, but also subtly instilled the Norman culture onto their guests in an “etiquette of submission and cultural assimilation” (R. DAVIES, 1990, p. 50). It was also not uncommon for a Norman king to hold children of Welsh nobility in his court – both to keep them under guardianship – to teach and protect – and to hold a civilizing influence. Through these subduing strategies, the Norman culture infiltrated Welsh courts. When analyzing the process of cultural domination imposed on the Welsh, the historian remarks,

Subjection was not always yielded, or demanded, at the point of the sword. It not infrequently took the form of willing and, indeed, optimistic surrender. Relationships between natives and newcomers were not infrequently cordial, even if some of the cordiality was contrived or forced. (...) Even when submission was exacted after a military showdown, or at least the threat of one, the relationship between lord and dependant was not infrequently construed – albeit rather optimistically – as one of mutual friendship rather than one of grovelling surrender. (R. DAVIES, 1990, p. 47-48)

Thus, marriage alliances, hostages, and subtle means of cultural infiltration were the strategies employed from early on to establish the place of Norman monarchy in Britain. Yet, these events were deeply influential on Welsh culture, and later history would prove these amicable relations stood on unstable ground. Under the reign of King William II, William I’s successor, the Normans would advance onto Deheubarth, Powys, and Dyfed; they were, however, met with resistance from the individual native rulers, and by the time William II died, in 1100, a great part of the territory was back under Welsh control. According to J. Davies “it is doubtful whether the insurrection which led to that restoration should be considered national in character, for it was largely motivated by local issues” (2007, p. 148) and the interests of the individual royal houses. The historian attributes the inner conflicts among the Welsh, at this point, as more prevalent than taking a stand against invading Normans; still, the scholar notes that, even if enough resources were not expended by the Normans fully to subjugate all areas of Wales, their influence was sufficiently widespread to make sure the Welsh would not unite under a native ruler (J. DAVIES, 2007).

The latter reigns of King Henry I (1100–35) and King Edward I (1272– 1307) are known as the ones which most incisively sought to assert power over Wales, beyond the mere recognition of sovereignty that others had demanded and the displays of power through occasional military expeditions. In Turvey's (2002) analysis, Henry I was influential, dominant, and manipulated the destinies of the dynasties of Deheubarth, Gwynedd and Powys, being the first Norman ruler to effectively establish significant royal territorial holdings in Wales. These incursions were significant, but it was only during the reign of Edward I (1272– 1307) that the Norman dynasty truly contemplated the conquest of Wales. Stephenson (2019) considers that Edward I's policies between 1277 and 1283 decisively fragmented Welsh administration, even more so than in the previous native organization, making the idea of a united Wales virtually unfeasible. About the aftermath of Edward I's conquest, Stephenson declares

Gone was the dream of a single Welsh polity. The post-Conquest regime in Wales was truly one in which division was a principal motif. Wales became uniform only in one sense: the crushing of native rebellions, in 1287 and 1294–5, and the humiliation of marcher magnates both demonstrated that Wales was subject to a resolute and ruthless English king. (STEPHENSON, 2019, p. 32)

In light of that, one can affirm that the relations between the Welsh rulers and Norman settlers were not simply friendly alliances; although the methods of cultural domination utilized were at times subtle, the implications and results were no less violent. As scholar Susan Aronstein (1994) describes, this continuous process of cultural and economical domination consisted of a gradual assimilation of Norman people and traditions into Wales, and that paved the way to the more incisive Norman military victories. To Aronstein, "this gradual conquest led to a kind of cultural schizophrenia, a situation that posed a great threat to Wales – the threat of losing a separate 'Welshness' and becoming merely a Norman fief" (1994, p. 217). Then, the foreign threat the Normans represented spurred the understanding of "Wales" as a unity, a people with shared experiences of oppression and domination. This view is corroborated by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2006) in *Identity, and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain*; the theorist describes that these peoples – the Britons, or the Welsh – had little regional affiliations at that time, as the native rulers engaged in constant wars among themselves, and the geographical borders were malleable. Cohen (2006) concludes that trauma was what united them, and the renewed invasions from

foreign forces strengthened their common characteristics; as the theorist remarks, “the Welsh became the Welsh relationally, through the fact that they held themselves to be utterly different from the nearby English, Flemish, Normans, Irish, and Jews.” (COHEN, 2006, p. 16)

The events which took place in the High and Late Middle Ages would have long enduring impacts onto Welsh culture and political organization, stretching across the centuries: around 1250, the Normans established religious houses, such as Carmarthen Priory, as part of a campaign “to reorganize the Welsh Church and to use it to consolidate their hold upon Wales” (J. DAVIES, 2007, p. 161); in the 16th century, King Henry VIII of England passed a series of parliamentary measures known as The Laws in Wales Acts 1535-1542. Those effectively annexed Wales to English territory and also imposed restrictions on Welsh language, preventing Welsh speaking people from taking public office in Wales. Some of these restrictions would only be repealed in the late 20th century. During the 19th century, Wales received a steady flow of immigrants who came to work in the growing number of coal mines; this new, diverse workforce inevitably changed the cultural landscape of the country, while the industrialization process increased the gap between English and Welsh speaking people: the former represented progress, affluence and intellectuality, while the latter was marked as backwards, rural, and linked to the working class (FEAR, 2012).

These landmarks on the history of Wales have led scholars to identify colonial elements in Welsh culture, and further within Welsh literature. In fact, Rees Davies (1990) is one of the first historians to revisit the Welsh medieval past and identify elements of colonialism in the domination efforts employed by the Normans onto the Welsh; this point of view would be reinforced and corroborated by other historians such as Roger Turvey in *The Welsh Princes* (2002), John Davies in *A History of Wales* (2007), and David Stephenson in *Medieval Wales* (2019). These scholars do not seek to cast an anachronistic look onto the medieval past, imposing onto these events a contemporary logic that would not apply to that time; rather, they intend to revisit that remote time in history, looking to interpret it within its specificities, with the help of current theoretical developments. These theories aid in comprehending the dynamics of domination and oppression and how they correlate to the cultural products elaborated in such environment.

In *Postcolonialism Revisited*, Kirsti Bohata (2004) makes an in-depth study of Welsh literature against its historical background and keeping in mind Wales’ relations with

England. The critic argues that the dynamic between Wales and England both resembles and challenges the current understanding of colonial relations – as the Welsh are often incorporated into the “British” identity, but have been historically perceived as less intellectual or evolved than the English. Bohata (2004) notes that Wales does not fit into the traditional patterns of progressive colonization, followed by resistance, and then resulting in decolonization/independence; instead, the critic considers that “structures of influence and subjugation are not necessarily coterminous with formal colonization or decolonization” (BOHATA, 2004, p. 8). Arguably, Wales has never come to be truly independent from English imperialism, and its domination was, in many ways, different from that of later British colonies. Bohata (2004) notes that, because of the domination strategies in Wales diverging from those employed by the English in other territories, some authors have argued that the Welsh would have been complicit to the British imperialism and colonization of fellow British peoples; others have also attempted to sever the connection between the oppression of the Welsh and their possible participation on the subjugation of others.

Rather, Bohata (2004) believes that the analysis can be more accurate when one considers the relations between Wales and England as a nuanced middle ground between these two perspectives; according to the critic, the Welsh have been subjected to a form of imperialism over a long period of time, but it is also worth noting that Wales has at times established beneficial alliances with England. The scholar points out that “it is neither helpful nor acceptable to divide desirable and undesirable attitudes to imperialism into Welsh and British (read English) perspectives respectively” (BOHATA, 2004, p. 5) and that such division does not help in comprehending the complex history of these peoples. Later, Bohata (2004) calls attention to a persistent tendency of comparing different communities’ experiences of subjugation, which often ignores the specific historical and cultural elements of each group, and thus disregards a set of violences inflicted upon those communities by the domination process.

This discussion is relevant to the present research as it informs the motivations and conditions for Welsh unification, and how it was understood at that moment in the Middle Ages. Further, such debate about the Welsh-Norman relations can aid in the comprehension of Welsh narratives within *Y Mabinogi*, and how literature constructed the shared cultural symbols of Wales. When describing the ways in which invasion and oppression have been a looming presence within Welsh literature, Bohata states,

Even earlier, of course, there was Anglo-Saxon invasion and settlement and it is arguable that, in terms of Welsh memory at least, discourses of domination and loss, of cultural imperialism, resistance and complicity may be traced from Aneurin's poem about the defeat at Catraeth, 'The Treason of the Long Knives', through Arthur and Giraldus Cambrensis to nineteenth-century works such as T. J. Llewelyn Prichard's *The Adventures and Vagaries of Twm Shon Catti* (1828), and up to the present day (BOHATA, 2004, p. 8)

In order to further understand how domination set in motion the ideals of Welsh unification expressed in the narrative of *Y Mabinogi*, it is relevant to take a brief look on how prominent writers preceding that time frame – 12th to 13th centuries – translated Welsh politics into narratives. Patricia Skinner (2018) comments on how previous incursions into Welsh territory were recorded in manuscripts and chronicles; according to the scholar, the writings of the Breton monk Gildas (c. 500-570) on the Saxon invasions expressed a certain pessimism that was targeted at the local rulers and their inner conflicts. Skinner (2018) notes that the Welsh monk Nennius, who lived in the 9th century and is recognized today for the work *Historia Brittonum*, also registered a disappointment on the politics of early British kings in face of foreign invasions.

After William I of England sailed from Normandy to expand his influence onto British territory, the recordings of Welsh politics still registered the violence inflicted by the foreign invaders, but often expressed a more ambiguous position when it came to their allegiances. In the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote the *History of the Kings of Britain (Historia Regum Britanniae)*, introducing Norman nobility to some figures of Welsh literary oral tradition, and created a literary account of the past rulers of the isle in an unbroken feudal lineage, thus aiding in the justification of Norman monarchy establishing power over the island. Gerald of Wales (born Gerald de Barri and known to posterity as *Giraldus Cambrensis*) wrote extensively about the Welsh marches and other territories – at times, in accounts with fictional elements which recall the conflicts which took place among the rulers.

At this time, the Latin works which emerged were strongly aligned with Norman politics, and often portrayed the people of Wales, particularly those in the frontier region of Welsh marches, as bestial or monstrous – as Cohen (2006) remarks, in a similar fashion to the opinions expressed about the Irish and the Scots. These descriptions seem to denote a wish to create strict boundaries between the – civilized – Normans and the native peoples of Wales. Gerald of Wales' works, however, display a more nuanced perspective; this author is

discussed here to demonstrate how Wales was portrayed in contemporary texts, and the ambiguous position portrayed in much of Welsh literature at that time. According to Turvey (2002), Gerald of Wales was related to some of the native rulers (his grandfather was Rhys ap Tewdwr of Deheubarth), and thus either personally knew or had knowledge about other Welsh leaders. Turvey (2002) also reports that the chronicler expressed pride in being partly Welsh and partly descendant from the Norman barons of the Marches; his declaration “bridges the gap somewhat between the views expounded by native writers and the opinions expressed by their English and continental counterparts” (TURVEY, 2002, p. 17).

In an introduction to her translation of *Y Mabinogi*, Sioned Davies argues that the tales within it allow for a “return to a familiar geographical landscape and a society apparently pre-dating any Norman influence” (S. DAVIES, 2007, p. XXV). The critic points out that all the events portrayed in these works of literature occur in a pre-Christian Wales and are populated by mythological figures – making it a narrative which revisits the Welsh past in a claim to identity and memory. However, the past portrayed in *Y Mabinogi* never existed – as I sought to demonstrate in this first section, there was hardly one Wales, or one cohesive Welsh identity to which these tales could refer. Instead, I propose that these literary narratives constitute a creation of such past, elaborating an image after which the Welsh could mold their future – one of a united land, protected from invasion through strong alliances.

Written text has, on several occasions, proved to be a path through which Wales asserted itself and its policies; perhaps one of the most important examples of this is the shift in titles for the rulers of Wales from *rex* to *princeps*. In 1163, as the Welsh leaders Rhys ap Gruffydd and Owain Gwynedd pledged oaths of allegiance to Henry II, their titles were all recorded in chronicles as *rex*. However, in later years, Owain Gwynedd would refer to himself as *princeps*, and even *princeps Wallensium* (the prince of the Welsh), in a claim for his status as the leader of the entire land. According to J. Davies (2007), the shift from king to prince did not denote a decrease in power; while there had been many kings in Wales, only the rulers of Gwynedd and Deheubarth had the right to be named princes. Moreover, these titles express a desire on the part of Welsh rulers to affirm themselves in face of the empire that had overrun their authority – and further, to ensure they held a higher status than that of the Norman barons and vassals. These registers remain as the only evidences of how the Welsh rulers perceived themselves and how their status was seen by other peoples (J. DAVIES, 2007).

John Davies (2007) also explains that Henry II's successors consistently employed efforts in bringing *Pura Wallia* further under their feudal rule; but that would ultimately help in solidifying the centralization of power in Wales, "for the Welsh rulers in turn could use feudalism to strengthen their power, as the activities of Llewelyn I and Llewelyn II would amply prove" (J. DAVIES, 2007, p. 176). The two kings which J. Davies refers to are Llewelyn ap Iorwerth, known as Llewelyn *Fawr* (the Great), and his grandson Llewelyn ap Gruffyd, or Llewelyn *Ein Llyw Olaf*, (Our Last Leader). Both are prominent figures in Welsh history, and as suggested by J. Davies (2007), took advantage of the feudal structure to advance their own policies for gathering the Welsh peoples under the rule of Gwynedd. The main strategy employed by these princes to unite the different territories of Wales – beyond military incursions – was to establish a common, written legal system for all. In the words of Aronstein,

The princes of Gwynedd began their quest to form such an "institutional" Wales with an appeal to judicial authority. This appeal rested on the codification of Welsh law – a step which (...) often accompanies an attempt to centralize government – and the promulgation of a myth of political unification. The law texts we know as the *Cyfraith Hywel* all date from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, centuries characterized by moves, first from Lord Rhys in Deheubarth and then from Llewelyn in Gwynedd, to consolidate and centralize power. (ARONSTEIN, 1994, p. 218)

As previously discussed, the Welsh had come close to becoming a unified people a few times prior to the Norman arrival. One such instance was under the reign of Hywel Dda (Hywel, the Good), in the 10th century. This ruler from Deheubarth lends its name to the legal system known as *Cyfraith Hywel*, which solidified common Welsh customs into laws and would deliberate on the separation of classes within Wales, on the rights of women, on what constituted criminal offense, and on the appropriate compensation for any wrongdoing. Although this system would be named the Laws of Hywel Dda, there are no registers from the 10th century mentioning these laws – thus leading Turvey (2002) to conclude that they were written after the time of Hywel, and were attributed to the monarch by his descendant, Lord Rhys of Deheubarth, in the 12th century. The *Cyfraith Hywel*, in Turvey's conception, could thus be seen as the product of a "twelfth-century prince wishing to cloak his reforms in the guise of conservatism and tradition" (2002, p. 170) – justifying current policies in the distant past. The figure of king Hywel assumes a mythical connotation, for the laws implied that Wales had achieved an ideal, fortified state under his rule.

Later, an updated redaction of these laws would be developed in Gwynedd by Llewelyn ap Iorwerth – as suggested by Aronstein (1994) above – as a means of forwarding his ambitions of centralizing Welsh government. In fact, Turvey argues that throughout the reign of Llewelyn ap Gruffydd, and as the legacy of Llewelyn ap Iorwerth, “the prospect of creating a united native polity gradually turned into a practical proposition and was, briefly, realised between 1267 and 1277” (2002, p. 5). The Iorwerth version of the *Cyfraith Hywel* leans onto the myth of Hywel Dda, but alters it slightly to imply that the leader who would gather Wales under his rule would hail from Gwynedd, rather than Deheubarth (ARONSTEIN, 1994). Essentially, these law tracts were a means of outlining “Welshness”¹ through the customs that set them apart from the Normans – thus, endorsing an identity through difference. However, Llewelyn ap Iorwerth’s policies expertly consisted of diplomatic relations with the Norman leaders, compromising and adopting foreign customs rather than rejecting them outright. Through Llewelyn Fawr’s rule, a hybrid cultural identity began to develop – and Welsh agency in the process was crucial to the natural progression of these changes, which were often violent imposed by outside forces.

Llewelyn ap Gruffydd was Llewelyn I’s grandson. About this monarch, Alan Fear explains: “Llewelyn II was as diplomatic and astute as his grandfather after whom he was named, in so much as he was able to regain territory from the Anglo-Norman incursions and win alliances with other Welsh princes without conflict” (FEAR, 2016, p. 99). In fact, his rule extended over a great area of *pura Wallia* and gradually advanced onto March territory. From 1262 onwards, he claimed the title of “prince of Wales and lord of Snowdon” (STEPHENSON, 2019, p. 20) which was acknowledged by King Henry III of England; the recognition, however was conditional on the Treaty of Montgomery, which demanded a tribute be paid by the Welsh prince to the Anglo-Norman Crown. This severely hindered the Welsh principality’s finances. In 1272 Edward I succeeds Henry III to the throne of England, and the already rocky relationships which had been somewhat sustained by the Treaty began to crumble. By 1277, Edward I and Llewelyn II had gone to war, which brought devastating outcomes to the Welsh principality. When Llywelyn ap Gruffydd is ambushed and killed in 1282, leaving behind no appointed heir, the dynasty that had spearheaded the dreams of a single Welsh polity had been extinguished.

¹ The concept of Welshness is complex, and thus it is used in this thesis within quotations to avoid any possible implications that there could be only one expression of Welsh identity; the use of the form “Welshness”, thus is chosen to reinforce the idea that Welsh identity is mutable a cultural construct with diverging interpretations.

Even after Edward I's interventions arguably left the political landscape of Wales more fragmented than it had ever been, both of the aforementioned native leaders had made significant advancements towards a cohesive Welsh cultural identity. Stephenson (2019) explains that a passage in the *Red Book of Hergest* describes an assembly which took place in 1258, when "the magnates of Wales gave an oath of allegiance to Llywelyn ap Gruffudd" (STEPHENSON, 2019, p. 360); a different version of the event recorded in another manuscript notes that "all the Welsh made a pact together, and they made an oath to maintain loyalty and agreement together" (*ibidem.*). Here, there is a clear example of the register and narrativization of Welsh unity, which I believe can be identified within the Four Branches of *Y Mabinogi*. Ultimately, such narratives produced concrete results, and Llewelyn I's ideological Wales was cemented after the initial establishment of the institutional Wales. In regards to this aspect, Aronstein comments,

The law tracts' proposed unification of Wales extends beyond the idea of "one country, one king" (in Gwynedd); they endorse not only an institutional Wales but also an ideological Wales. The laws posit a distinctive "welshness", based on a legal identity that sets the people of Wales apart from their Norman enemies and their Norman allies alike. The House of Aberffraw capitalized on this polemic in 1212 and again in 1218 when Llewelyn convinced the lords of Wales to unite with him (or, more precisely, under him) in an attempt to reconquer Wales and rout the Norman lords. (ARONSTEIN, 1994, p. 219)

Having established some of the historical and political contexts of the High Middle Ages in Wales, and the possible effect of collective narratives in the political landscape of these individual Welsh groups, this study now turns to the description of *Y Mabinogi* as a whole. In the following section, I explore how this set of texts relates to Welsh literary tradition and some relevant elements of its narrative construction. I then report on critics' hypothesis regarding who may have created *Y Mabinogi*, and to what purpose; moreover, I describe a few aspects concerning the first translation of *Y Mabinogi* into English.

1.2 *Y Mabinogi*

The Mabinogion (*Y Mabinogi* in Welsh) consists of a translation of the medieval Welsh manuscripts *Llyfr Coch Hergest* (*The Red Book of Hergest*, National Library of Wales mss. Peniarth 4 and 5, c. 1350) and *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch* (*The White Book of Rhydderch*,

Oxford, Jesus College ms. 111, c. 1400). The transcription of those texts is attributed to the scribe Hywel Fychan fab Hywel Goch o Fuellt. They were possibly written between the High and Late Middle Ages, in a wide time frame during which Wales was in constant clash with invading Norman forces; they would only be translated into English in the nineteenth-century by Lady Charlotte Guest. The work is composed of eleven tales; four of those are distinctively grouped into what has become known as the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi* (*Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi*) due to their all ending with the similar line: “*Acyuellyy teruyna ygeing honn o’r Mabinogi* (‘And so ends this branch of the *Mabinogi*’)” (BOYD, 2010, p. 22). Those also display some recurrent characters – such as Pryderi, who is born in the First Branch and dies in the fourth – and closely related themes such as war, alliances, and other aspects of Welsh politics. The other seven tales present a looser connection with this first set. They have been traditionally classified into two groups: the four Native Tales (*The Dream of Macsen Wledig*, *Lludd and Llefelys*, *Culhwch and Olwen*, and *The Dream of Rhonabwy*) and the Three Welsh Romances (*Owain or the Lady of the Fountain*, *Peredur son of Efwarg*, and *Geraint and Enid*).

Those stories focus on the adventures of King Arthur and the knights of his court. Within the Native Tales, elements of Welsh narrative tradition are more apparent than in the Welsh Romances (S. DAVIES, 2007); they present vocabulary from the Welsh language variety which was spoken in the south of Wales, and the action of those tales seems to be located in that same region. The latter three Welsh romances are more aligned with the literary traditions of French romance and have been compared to Chrétien de Troyen’s poems, *Perceval*, *Erec et Enide*, and *Yvain*, as their ambientation of chivalrous tales and courtly adventures is somewhat similar to those in the French literary tradition. Although these texts may be entwined with a French tradition, S. Davies (2007) argues that the tales known as the Three Welsh Romances within *Y Mabinogi* have been culturally and structurally adapted to the Welsh narrative tradition. The author further explains that “although they exhibit some of the broad characteristics of romance, such as concerns regarding chivalric modes of behaviour and knightly virtues, they do not lie comfortably within that genre” (S. DAVIES, 2007, p. XI), and therefore, the denomination of “Welsh Romance” is unfitting to these literary texts.

When discussing the Three Welsh Romances, Susan Aronstein (1994) questions whether identifying and segregating the Welsh and French aspects within these narratives tales is the best method to employ in the analysis of this set of tales; the author claims that

the critics often seek to strip away the French elements from these texts, attempting to search for an original tale that would be purely Welsh. Instead, Aronstein (1994) proposes an approach to the text as it is currently presented to the reader, and argues,

While such undressing of the tale is in many ways a useful and informative exercise, confining ourselves to this type of archaeological analysis limits our knowledge, because it ignores what the text as it stands can tell us about the ideals and anxieties of the particular culture that produced it. Thus, to discuss the romances solely in terms of a now-lost “original” story – a discussion typically focused around the Welsh tales’ relationship to their French counterparts – obscures the larger implications of the texts’ participation in the consolidation and formation of medieval Welsh culture. (ARONSTEIN, 1994, p. 215)

From this analysis, two important ramifications can be noted: firstly, it echoes the notion of identity as a mutable narrative construct; there is no original Welsh text to look back to, because Welsh culture would always have been in touch with other cultures, which permeate one another. Thus, the search for an original tale is hardly fruitful, as the currently accessible written form of the text expresses Welsh literary aspects as they were after the initial contact with French writings; the different aspects of these cultures have been entwined and now constitute a third space, which is at the same time both and neither of the prior individual cultures. At this point, Aronstein (1994) describes that the Three Welsh Romances express themes relevant to Wales of its own time: namely, the unification of the Welsh under one leader, the importance of alliances through marriage, and the need for protection from outside invaders. The critic associates these subjects to the policies established by the princes of Gwynedd, mainly those which were created under Llewelyn ap Iowerth with the aim of becoming the sole prince over Wales.

Besides the implementation of a feudal system which would join all Welsh peoples under the same monarch, Aronstein (1994) describes other elements of Llewelyn I’s policies, such as “the attempt to standardize law codes and introduce a central judicial system controlled by said monarch, and the need to manipulate political alliances through a careful program of advantageous marriages” (p. 216), which were based on Norman law over inheritance and matrimony. R. Davies (1990) describes that, although never brought to completion, Llewelyn I’s politics were essential to the endurance of Wales against total incorporation by the Normans, who sought to defuse Welsh leaderships and authority.

Llewelyn ap Iorweth reigned in the 13th century, while the earliest manuscripts of *Llyfr Coch Hergest* and *Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch* date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Even if the stories were written at a later time, they may still reflect the feeling that emerged during Llewelyn's time – the search for a unified Wales. It is considered that most of these tales (particularly those of the four branches) originate from a previous, oral Welsh literature. When referring to *Y Mabinogi*, Alan Lupack claims that “some of the material contained in these poems, however, dates to a time significantly earlier than when the manuscripts were written” (LUPACK, 2007, p. 329); Turvey (2002) suggest that the oral tales may have been composed around 1060 and W.J. Gruffydd (1953) points to research which has revealed, through the study of language and orthography, that these tales could have been composed before the end of the eleventh century. Sioned Davies reinforces that idea, and adds to the notion that the current Welsh-Norman conflict was strongly related to the moment when this oral tales were transcribed into writing,

We can probably assume that they were written down sometime between the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries, against a background of vast change in the history of Wales. During this period the Welsh struggled to retain their independence in the face of the Anglo-Norman conquest which ultimately transformed the society, economy, and church of Wales. (S. DAVIES, 2007, p. XVII)

Such was the historical context in which *Y Mabinogi* were written; according to Patricia Ingham (2001), the twelfth and fourteenth centuries were times of particularly violent Norman politics toward Wales and Ireland. In the analysis of this social environment, the critic argues that “when viewed from the perspective of England's colonial aggressions *vis-à-vis* the so-called Celtic Fringe, the ‘Red Book’ manuscript becomes politically provocative” (INGHAM, 2001, p. 179). In *Myths and Legends of the Celts*, James Mackillop (2006) argues that *Y Mabinogi* are texts that draw from mythological tradition without being myths themselves. The themes explored in the section called the four branches are those of “friendships, marriages, and feuds” (MACKILLOP, 2006, p. 273) – which were, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, crucial political elements of Wales during the High Middle Ages.

Similarly, Sioned Davies (2007) describes *Y Mabinogi* as a rich and diverse work of literature, composed of conflicting aspects, which may have emerged from the turbulent social environment in which they were written. *Y Mabinogi*, therefore, are a ‘collection’ of independent and extremely diverse tales. They provide a snapshot of the storyteller's

repertoire, and give us an insight into the wealth of narrative material that was circulating in medieval Wales. Not only do they reflect themes and characters from myth and legend, they also show how Wales responded to conquest and colonization, and in so doing made a unique contribution to European literature (DAVIES, 2007, p. 13). The author suggests that these tales performed a role in Welsh resistance against the cultural oppression imposed first by the Normans, and later by the English. It is implied that these stories, which appear to have circulated mainly through oral literature and storytelling, may have been written down as a direct reaction to Norman incursions, and could then represent a claim to Welsh history and identity.

Whether the manuscripts from which *Y Mabinogi* originated were the work of one or many authors is uncertain, although Sioned Davies (2007) claims that structural and linguistic similarities within the “four branches” seem to indicate they may have been written by the same person. The scholar notes a genuine interest in the human nature of the characters expressed throughout the narratives which, while still displaying aspects and techniques of oral literature, has already been touched by the world of storytelling. W. J. Gruffydd expressed a similar opinion, arguing “the man who wrote it was not necessarily a *cyvarwydd*, a reciter of stories; the only possible term to describe him is ‘author’, exactly as Homer is the author of the *Odyssey*” (GRUFFYDD, 1953, p. 2). In light of this, the critic believes that the *Mabinogion*, as a written text, can hold little of the oral literary tradition of Wales – being, instead, the carefully crafted work of one writer. As further evidence to this argument, Gruffydd (1953) points out that while other manuscripts of the time had a great number of copies, *Y Mabinogi* only appears in three books; moreover, it was common practice for works of written literature to make references to multiple other texts and stories. *Y Mabinogi* is filled with such mentions; however the tales that it contains are not referenced elsewhere. In light of that, the critic reaches four statements: the Welshmen of that period were familiar with the rudimentary elements of the literary tradition of the *cyvarwyddydd*, who were popular poets and entertainers; the “primitive” *cyvarwyddydd* were never put into writing, otherwise they would most likely be mentioned in other written texts; *Y Mabinogi* was crafted by one writer, who Gruffydd deems an author – thus, being closer to Chrétien de Troyes poems, rather than his sources. Finally, the scholar concludes that *Y Mabinogi* in

written form would not have been read by the Welsh as were other manuscripts, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Brut y Brenhinedd*² (GRUFFYD, 1953).

Gruffydd (1953) is not the only critic to reach that conclusion about the surviving manuscripts of *Y Mabinogi*, and the identity of the possible author to the set of tales is still shrouded in mystery. Although, as previously mentioned, Hywel Fychan fab Hywel is usually accepted as the scribe of the *White Book of Rhydderch* and the *Red Book of Hergest*, several possible authors – in Gruffydd's sense of the word – have emerged, and scholars are yet to reach a consensus about the identity of the person responsible for such a work. Returning to S. Davies' (2007) research, the authorship of the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi* has been attributed to Welsh nobles, some of which are Sulien, an 11th-century bishop in the order of Saint David, and Rhigyfarch, Sulien's son and author of *Life of Saint David*. Gwenllian of the House of Aberffraw (1097–1136), daughter of Gruffudd ap Cynan, king of Gwynedd, has also been considered as a possible author to this set of stories (DAVIES, 2007). The hypothesis which pointed to princess Gwenllian as the creator of the work was elaborated by Andrew Breeze (1997) in the book *Medieval Welsh Literature*; Breeze (1997) argues, through associations between Gwenllian's life and education and passages of *Y Mabinogi*, that the noble woman had the education and the motive to write such a work: seeking to rekindle the glories of Deheubarth, which had belonged to her husband Gruffudd ap Rhys. Furthermore, that could explain the restricted circulation of *Y Mabinogi* which Gruffydd (1953) notices, because the text would have remained in possession of Gwenllian's descendants through the lineage of Lord Rhys of Deheubarth (BREEZE, 1997).

As compelling as Breeze's hypothesis is, uncertainty concerning the authorship of *Y Mabinogi* still remains. For the purposes of this research, however, these possibilities are relevant because they raise evidence concerning the literacy of Welsh aristocracy and the blooming written culture of the twelfth century. As Turvey describes, that period “witnessed a quickening of the transition from an essentially oral to a written cultural tradition, and native literature in its many forms played an essential part in court life” (2002, p. 168-169). Stephenson (2019) reinforces that idea, remarking that the period called The Age of Princes coincides with the emergence of the *Gogynfeirdd*; this would be the time when the rulers of Wales adopted the title of princes to differentiate their status from the Marcher barons,

² *Brut y Brenhinedd* is the Welsh version of Geoffrey of Monmouth's celebrated Latin work *Historia Regum Britanniae*. *Brut* was produced about 100 years after the original.

starting around 1170. Thus, this literary form accompanied some crucial changes in the political scenery of medieval Wales, as it was “increasingly an age of professional expertise, and governance was thereby rendered still more complex” (STEPHENSON, 2019, p. 57).

As the historian describes, such blooming professional expertise in the specialized fields of literature, medicine, law, and military technologies brought great diversity to the range of people which would be present at court; some of these nuances certainly appear to be present within *Y Mabinogi*. Thus, there seems to be evident that literature played an important cultural role among the Welsh aristocracy; arguably, the influence and composition of the Laws of Hywel Dda hint at the ways which the Welsh employed written text and narrativization of history as a means of constructing a shared past with the aim of creating a feeling of unity, and *Y Mabinogi* performs a similar role in the literary sphere. Whether the final writer of *Y Mabinogi* was a member of Welsh aristocracy or not, the ambitions and endeavors of princes were certainly a favored subject across the many forms of Welsh literature. As Roger Turvey describes,

Although the princes seem not to have been directly involved in commissioning works, poetic, prose or otherwise, they nevertheless provided a focus for the ambitious *littérateur* hoping to attract their attention, support and sponsorship. In this way verse, prose and song would be dedicated to and woven around would-be patrons and sponsors whether they wished it or not. (TURVEY, 2002, p. 169)

Throughout the twelfth century in particular, literary production was flourishing; it saw the dawn of vernacular literature, which in Wales was presented in the courtly poetry of the *Gogynfeirdd*. According to Ann Owen’s entry for *The Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature in Britain* (2017), these were professional writers who composed Welsh praise poetry for the Welsh princes and nobility, which dominated the Welsh literary scene from c. 1100 until the death of Llewelyn ap Gruffydd, the last prince of independent Wales, in 1283. Other poets would continue to compose in similar language and meter throughout the fourteenth century. As Owen explains, “the term *Gogynfeirdd* was coined in the 18th century, and can be loosely translated as ‘the fairly early poets’, to distinguish them from the *Cynfeirdd*, ‘the early poets’” (2017, [n.p.]). To describe the *Cynfeirdd* tradition, Matthieu Boyd (2017) explains that these were the earliest poets known to compose in Welsh, and their largely anonymous work dates from some point between the sixth and the eleventh centuries. The dominant modes of early Welsh poetry are heroic elegy and eulogy

commemorating military virtues and heroism in battle. These concepts aid in explaining some of the references within the Four Branches, which are rooted in either one or the other tradition; for instance, many episodes of *Y Mabinogi* recall the tales first described by the poetry of the *Cyfeirdd*.

In Gruffydd's (1953) analysis, *Y Mabinogi* in written form would not have been widely accessible or largely known to the Welsh; the material which originated this manuscript, however, is strongly rooted in Welsh oral tradition, specifically from the regions of Dyfed and Gwynedd. About the lack of mentions to the material which constitutes *Y Mabinogi* in other Welsh literary texts from that time, Gruffydd (1953) concludes that these tales likely belonged to the *cyfarwyddon*, or *beirdd*, tradition. These poets were considered to be entertainers, their craft less refined than the *penceirddiaid* (chiefs of song) whose strict code forbade the interaction with what was thought to be "lower class" material, which did not conform to the traditional, canonical literary form. While *Y Mabinogi* is not mentioned by other contemporary texts, the tales in the Four Branches constantly bring up other stories, often attempting to explain the origin of certain characters or names which would likely be already present in Welsh literature. The recall of a united past is reinforced by Aronstein's (2005) comments on the *Gogynfeirdd* – or the Poets of the Princes (*Beirdd y Tywysogion*), as they are sometimes called – as the author claims that the poets offered an heroic image of the Welsh past to support "Llewelyn ap Iowerth's attempt to validate a hybrid feudal identity that, in many ways, conformed to the political and social norms of the invader" (p. 141)

One such material is the Welsh triads, or the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, which are defined by Rachel Bromwich (2014) as an index, a fragment, of earlier oral Welsh tradition which was later incorporated into the Four Branches and the other sets of tales in *Y Mabinogi*. These were likely the literary forms used to instruct apprentice storytellers, aiding them in the recollection of larger stories, as the triads often connect different tales that share a similar theme. The triads are a constant presence within *Y Mabinogi*, mentioned throughout the Four Branches: the Three Golden Shoemakers include characters from the tale of Manawydan and Math, the Three Unfortunate Blows describe Branwen's plight as registered in the Second Branch, and the Three Undemanding Chieftains are recalled in the Third Branch, adding meaning to Manawydan's authority. As Bromwich (2014) points out, the title *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* translates to The Triads of the Island of Britain; this is significant because it indicates these tales are a celebration of the traditions of Britain as a whole. "They look back upon the essential and still ideal sovereign unity of the island" (p. LVII), and recall the

invasions which ultimately caused this union to be dismantled. Thus, as Aronstein (2005) explains, the basis for Welsh union was either centred on the distant past, “when the Britons held sovereignty over the island, or in the future, when that sovereignty would be restored” (p. 147).

As Davies (2007) describes, “Mabinogion” stands as the plural form to the Welsh word *mabinogi*; the translation varies, as it can be considered “a tale for the young” (or, a story for apprentice bards and storytellers to practice), and also “a tale of youth”. It is considered to have been a mistake on Lady Charlotte Guest’s – and on other scholars of the time – part, as the word has no lexical origins in Welsh, and it is understood to have been a scribal error. The main corpus analyzed in this thesis is the set of tales known as the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi* (*Pedair Kainc y Mabinogi*). The term “branches” originates from the French tradition, and implies that all four sections are connected to form one larger story – as the branches conjoining at the trunk of a tree. However, that denomination is also an important descriptive factor to *Y Mabinogi*, for it “does not imply a linear continuum” (MACKILLOP, 2006, p. 249) indicating that these narratives are fairly independent from one another.

Matthew Boyd (2010) also comments on the classification of *Y Mabinogi* as a work composed of “branches”. The critic considers the tales of the *Pedair Cainc* not to be a direct translation from the French tradition, because the “trunk” is not made clear, as it would be in continental literature. As an example of such, Boyd (2010) mentions the Arthurian tales of the Grail cycle, which tell the stories of different knights in distinct adventures, but they remain connected to the “trunk” which is the background search for the Holy Grail. If that was the case within *Y Mabinogi*, the trunk to which the other tales would be attached could only be the story of Pryderi’s life, for he is the only character present in all four tales. But, as Boyd (2010) describes, the life of Pryderi is narrated only as the other stories encroach upon it; that is, his tale is told only at the points in which he is a part of the story of Pwyll and Rhiannon, or Gwydion and Lleu Llaw Gyffes, or the other characters in each of the branches. In conclusion, Pryderi participates, but is not the main focus of these tales. Sioned Davies (2007) offers some alternative interpretations to the denomination “*cainc*”; the translator argues that rather than “branch”, the word could be read as a strand or yarn in a rope, thus evoking the image of interweaving stories that make up the whole. S. Davies (2007) also identifies a third meaning of “song” or “tune”, suggesting a musical and oral context to these stories.

In spite of this fascinating history, the *mabinogion* seem to have remained mostly unknown and untouched by English speaking readers from the end of the Middle Ages until the Romantic period. As previously mentioned, nineteenth century Britain would witness a rising interest in the body of literature surrounding Arthurian legend and Celtic folklore, and as a result, many authors would draw on these stories to produce new texts, many of which were translations, adaptations and, essentially, recreations of the “matter of Britain”. Prys Morgan (1992) describes that during the late 18th century and early 19th century there was a blooming interest from writers in searching for and reinventing aspects of Welsh culture. Lady Charlotte Guest (1812-95), among these authors, became known for her compilation of the tales contained in *The Red Book of Hergest* and *The White Book of Rhydderch*, which she translated between 1838 and 1849; she was an English woman, and the first edition to her translation brought both the Welsh and English texts and several scholarly notes. Guest’s work was originally titled *Mabinogion*; when commenting on the collection’s title, Sioned Davies points out that,

She [Charlotte Guest] regarded it as the plural form of *mabinogi*, and an ideal title for her collection. As her translation was published time and time again, the title became established, and by now has become an extremely convenient way to describe the corpus. However, it needs to be emphasized that the term *Mabinogion* is no more than a label, and a modern-day one at that: the stories vary as regards date, authorship, sources, content, structure, and style. (DAVIES, 2007, p. IX-X)

Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation has received controversial feedback over the centuries since its publication; her work has been highly praised, but also scrutinized and harshly critiqued. Guest’s *Mabinogion* “is often condemned for being inaccurate, for excluding passages which she considered too erotic, and for generally embellishing the Welsh text as she transposed it into English” (WYNNE-DAVIES, 1996, p. 111). According to Marion Wynne-Davies (1996), Lady Charlotte Guest was an English woman who married a Welsh businessman (an industrialist named Sir John Guest); she had no formal education as a translator or in the Middle Welsh language, and her task of transposing those medieval tales into English for the first time was something that many had attempted, but failed to achieve (WYNNE-DAVIES, 1996).

Her journals reveal her translation process; Lady Charlotte Guest seemed to have felt constricted by the duties of a woman and wife in the Victorian society, which in time contributed for her to attempt such an ambitious task. The translator’s notes also reveal that

she grew attached to Wales and its culture, going as far as to mention it as “my own dear country”; Guest’s journals also describe how she wished to pass down to her children the stories of their “national heritage”, demonstrating her passion for the British of the past. In the words of Wynne-Davies,

Certainly her evocation of a glorious Arthurian past, which contrasted harshly with the contemporary downfall of the Celtic races, was – and is – a frequently resurrected discourse amongst Welsh writers. The young woman who had dreamt of a free and romanticized existence clearly felt an affinity with the marginalized Welsh nation amongst whom she was summarily expected to make her home. (...) The factor which united the Welsh bards reciting their poetry at the eisteddfodau with the young English woman preparing for a life of domesticity was an acute awareness of their own marginalized and disempowered states, together with a longing for a past Arthurian age in which romantic ideals could still be attained. (WYNNE-DAVIES, 1996, p. 113-14)

Through these notes, one could argue that Guest was moved by the same feeling which inspired many of the Romantic and medievalist works; it was a search for the past, and for an idealized “original” British people. As stated by Wynne-Davies (1996), Charlotte Guest writes at an intersection between the Romantic Movement, the Victorian ideals and the Celtic revivalism. While it looks to the past and praises the Welsh culture and its idealized past of glory, *Y Mabinogion* is also related to the present – that is, to the times in which it was translated. Furthermore, in being a translation of once already transposed texts (from oral literature into manuscript form), *The Mabinogion* creates bridges and interweaves discourses from different ages.

Although Lady Charlotte Guest, as a wealthy Victorian woman, had no intention to rebel against her socially determined role, her work hints at her dissatisfaction and, consequently, her determination to achieve something more for herself. That she then sought to translate a complex medieval text speaks of the values of popular medievalism, in which “the medieval inheritance was seen to confirm the rights of individuals” (SIMMONS, 2011, p. 10). Thus, propelled by the medievalist themes, Lady Charlotte Guest employed her own personal motivations in a translation of ancient texts; her contribution is considered to be one of the first done by female authors to the Arthurian legend and literature. Moreover, the feeling of retrieving a lost past which seems to have stimulated Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation was, in a way, already present in the medieval text. The overarching narrative of *Y*

Mabinogi sought to create an idealized past after which the future could be modeled, if the independent Welsh units gathered under one prince.

1.3 Theoretical Background

When outlining the field of Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall describes the context of political and economic struggles of England post World War II, during the decades of 1950 and 1960; the first studies under this line of thought emerged among the increasing affluence of the working class. Stuart Hall explains that the very concept of culture was coined as a response to the political question surrounding the practices of the working class and their increasing economic affluence (HALL, 2016). Literary criticism was, from early on, deeply influential on the field of Cultural Studies; according to Hall (2016), Richard Hoggart and F. R. Leavis were two of the first authors to interpret culture under this perspective, and theirs was the view of literary critics – thus, focusing on how culture and language interacted. In connecting these two areas of study, these scholars were interested in “the whole culture in which particular writers were located and in which particular texts were formed” (HALL, 2016, p. 13).

Thus, the analysis of a literary text under the perspective of Cultural Studies must consider the other aspects which surround it; literature is one element in the larger cultural setting, which also includes the historical, economic, political, and linguistic context of a people. More specifically, analyses developed within the field of Cultural Studies always stand in response to social and political challenges, which Hall (2016) calls a “conjuncture”. The conjuncture which concerns the present research, then, is mainly the High Middle Ages in Wales, focusing on the process of constructing a cultural identity through narrative. When discussing the turbulent background to the production of *Y Mabinogi*, Aronstein (1994) comments that the interactions between the Welsh and the Normans resulted in a period of cultural transition; the tales contained in the Four Branches unsurprisingly portray conflicts regarding alliances, loyalties and the definition of cultural boundaries. These conflicts, however, are not simply the struggles between Norman oppressors, and the Welsh, a passive victim; instead, “each text deals with changes within Welsh society itself and revolves around the clashes between an old, dying order and a new, triumphant regime” (ARONSTEIN, 1994, p. 216).

In order to develop the analysis of the Four Branches of *Y Mabinogi* under this perspective, certain concepts related to the field of Cultural Studies must be outlined. First, it is worth exploring the idea of cultural identity. The theorist Stuart Hall defines identity through the analysis of certain peoples which have undergone a process of colonization – thus, focusing on group identities, rather than individual identities. In the text “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Hall (1990) describes identity as process, constantly mutable and malleable. Therefore, the theorist understands cultural identity as a construct. Within the aforementioned article, the author further elaborates on the collective aspect of the concept of “identity” by studying the Caribbean cinema and the role of representation in the development of Caribbean, black, cultural identities. Hall (1990) offers two related definitions: the first outlines cultural identity as a collective sense of self, created through the shared history of a people. It is, in the theorist’s analysis, an ever changing construct which is constituted through representation – and therefore, through language. Cultural identity is strongly tied to the creation of such notions as community, and nation, and “one people”, which hold “stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (HALL, 1990, p. 223).

Hall’s second definition again turns to the sense of identity as an ever transforming idea of the self, which refers as much to already “being” as to what one can become; cultural identity is hardly fixed, and reconfigures itself under the influences of social and historical events. As the author points out, cultural identities do not simply exist, created in a set time in the past – instead, they change and adapt. The theorist states that the sense of identity of a people cannot be recovered through an examination of the past, because it cannot be located at any one point in history. Neither is identity inherent; there is no fixed point in which a pure and foundational identity could have existed, and thus it cannot be recovered. It is, instead, a constant subject to the alterations in culture and power. These ideas seem to offer an explanation to the complex processes involving the development of Welsh identity during the Norman invasions in the Middle Ages. For the purposes of this work, identity is understood as a construction which is both subjective and collective, as Stuart Hall remarks,

I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. (HALL, 2003, p. 5-6)

In Hall's argument, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (1990, p. 225). When considering Welsh history, such processes arguably began prior to the Normans themselves, with the Anglo-Saxon invasions in the Early Middle Ages. At that time, the British peoples first became known as the Welsh, which originated from the Germanic term *Waelas*, a word that has been interpreted as "foreigner" (FEAR, 2016, p. 46-47). Thus, named as strangers in the place they had inhabited for a few centuries, the Britons began calling themselves *Cymry*, which can be translated as "fellow countrymen". This appears to be a first step to the development of an identity through a difference, as explained by Hall: clearly placing boundaries between "us" and "them" in fiction (1990, p. 228).

By the thirteenth century, Llewelyn ap Iorwerth had labored to construct a sense of Welsh cultural identity; the influence of the Normans was unavoidable, but Llewelyn I drew from the foreign legal system and political organization to apply changes to the Welsh customs – transforming them into native policies in the process. That was accomplished partly through the masterful use of narrative: the Iorwerth redaction of the *Cyfraith Hywel* recalls the myth of Hywel Dda – the leader of a united Wales – and attributes new policies to the glorious time of that ruler. But such an age had never existed; the political configuration of Wales during the Middle Ages was, with few exceptions, fragmented and riddled with inner conflicts. Nevertheless, during the reign of Llewelyn ap Gruffydd, the shared meanings registered and perpetuated through literary language had absorbed the idea of union; Stephenson (2019) argues,

It is noticeable that it is particularly in the period of Llewelyn ap Gruffudd's rise to power that the relations between rulers are sometimes couched in formulae which mention *amicitia*, *unitas*, *unio* and the like. The tendency towards submission to a single prince was therefore on occasion paralleled, and perhaps facilitated, by the use of concepts of confederative union. And that tendency may well have been encouraged by the poets' depiction of a circuit, or a gathering, of the regions of Wales, which while emphasizing the existence of different regions, brought them all together in a single whole (STEPHENSON, 2019, p. 36-37)

Thus, the past often portrayed in Welsh narratives – such as the laws or the Triads – was a fabrication with the intent of propelling a certain cultural identity. There are consistent examples of medieval Welsh literature portraying the transitional stage of a culture, and the

artistic attempts to come to terms and outline this new, developing identity. This process of constructing identity through narrative can be explained by the concept of representation. In the introduction to *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall proposes that “representation” is an essential part of the “circuit of culture”, which also includes identity, production, consumption, and regulation. According to Hall (1997), those are the essential practices in the construction of culture – and the stages of this circuit are permeated by language. The theorist outlines the concept of culture as a set of shared meanings and practices. The production of these meanings and the way they are exchanged among individuals can only happen and be accessed through language; thus, this is the essential medium of culture.

Culture, in Hall’s conception, is primarily “concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings – the 'giving and taking of meaning' – between the members of a society or group” (1997, p. 2). The theorist explains that representation is the manner we use, reflect, and feel about things. Ultimately, it is through the collective’s relation with certain aspects which ultimately results in them acquiring meaning. Representation is, in Hall’s (1997) words, the frameworks of interpretations through which the aspects of life are perceived by a human group. In order for these meanings to be widely comprehended and properly assimilated into culture, however, they need to be shared and perpetuated. This process occurs through what Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay describe as the “circuit of culture”.

Hall and Du Gay’s (1990) circuit of culture suggests that meanings are created by different means, and circulate in a group through different practices; as Hall describes, “meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we 'belong' – so it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups” (1997, p. 3). The theorist explains that members of the same culture share a set of concepts, symbols and ideas which permeate the way each individual interprets the world – they may reach different conclusions from these meanings, but they are, nevertheless, pervaded by culture. To Hall (1997), thoughts and feelings are in themselves “systems of representation” through which people interpret the world around them. These shared meanings must, however, be communicated; then, it is crucial for the people to hold similar linguistic codes – which goes beyond spoken and written language, encompassing recognizable body language and facial expressions, and

familiarity with sounds that would be interpreted similarly as music, for example. These material elements construct and transmit meaning.

Furthermore, language in itself is a signifying practice. In order for the process of representation to take place, language must be utilized to produce and share certain meanings – and it is the privileged medium for the construction of meanings. When discussing the role of language, Hall (1997) points to two possible approaches: the semiotic and the discursive. While the semiotic approach focuses on the means through which language produces meaning, the discursive approach “is more concerned with the effects and consequences of representation” (HALL, 1997, p. 6). The first is identified by the theorist as poetics, while the latter, politics. Hall describes the discursive perspective, “examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities” (ibid.). The current analysis of the Four Branches of *Y Mabinogi* takes on the discursive approach.

Hall’s (1997) conception of representation is not, therefore, that of a way of simply transmitting previously established meanings; the theorist’s elaboration falls in line with the “cultural turn” in social sciences which understands meaning as something that is always constructed through human interaction and interventions, and not something which pre-exists in the world and is merely discovered by the individuals. These reflections concerning language were, as noted by Hall, originated by the “discursive turn” and greatly shifted the ways in which social and cultural sciences interpret “the general use of language and discourse as models of how culture, meaning and representation work” (HALL, 1997, p. 6). Hall’s mentions of cultural, or discursive, turn corresponds to the “linguistic revolution”; in the words of Terry Eagleton, this hallmark in literary theory expresses “the recognition that meaning is not simply something 'expressed' or 'reflected' in language: it is actually produced by it” (EAGLETON, 1996, p. 52).

One of the main breakthroughs of the cultural turn, then, is the recognition that meaning is not immanent or natural to things in the world. Rather, it is constructed and produced through language. This is essentially why Hall considers language to be a signifying practice: it constructs meaning (HALL, 1997). When looking to the Welsh historical and political contexts exposed in the previous section, it is clear that fictional narratives and language have been consciously employed to outline the boundaries of Welsh

identity in opposition to the Normans. Moreover, the theorist concludes that language “is the shared cultural 'space' in which the production of meaning through language – that is representation – takes place” (HALL, 1997, p. 10). If representation is understood as being the foundational core of a group’s shared meanings, culture stands as a constitutive part of social relations and historical events. Therefore, the collective or cultural identity of a people is, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes, “the culmination of energetic processes of remembering, of anchoring an uncertain present in a fantastically stable past” (COHEN, 2006, p. 81), which is particularly present in Welsh medieval literature and especially in the selected corpus of this research.

In light of that, the perspective of cultural studies seems fitting to the analysis of some aspects of *Y Mabinogi* which are concerned with literature and the creation of a collective narrative; although the understanding of medieval readers and scribes would likely not be stated in the modern concepts of nation and representation, the process of differentiating Wales from other groups within Great Britain was already taking place, and it is portrayed in literature of that time. As previously discussed in this thesis, Wales had long been battling with inner conflicts and the attempts at unification came with further disputes among the principalities. Considering this turbulent political landscape, it was crucial that the narrative of Wales supported the ideals of unification on the part of the Princes of Gwynedd. Then, when analyzing Welsh identity, the process of representation is taken as foundational to its construction. According to Hall’s definition,

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (HALL, 1990, p. 222)

In the opening paragraph to this first chapter, I have pointed out that his research aims at demonstrating how the idea of Wales as a kingdom, and later nation, was created by and through fiction. Such statement springs partly from Edward Said’s (1993) reflections on the role narratives play in consolidating social groups and mediating between cultures. In fact, according to Said (1993), narrative is an essential part of domination and conquest, as it is often used to undermine the humanity of a specific group in order to justify their oppression and displacement. On the other hand, narrative can serve as a means for the oppressed peoples to assert their own existence and history. The theorist further describes

that “the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (SAID, 1993, p. XV).

It is clear from the context previously described that the rulers of Gwynedd, particularly Llewelyn ap Iowerth and Llewelyn ap Gruffydd, were invested in narrating Wales and cementing Welsh identity in an idealized past. Aronstein (1994) notes that the discourse of identity in Wales during the High Middle Ages was deeply influenced by the legislation conceived by these princes – but the discourse of a single, homogeneous identity was hardly sustainable, as Welsh rulers encountered the need to compromise and consort with the Normans, rather than fighting them in direct war; in the critic’s analysis, “although the princes of Gwynedd used the rhetoric of Welsh legal identity for their own ends, they were also not above violating that identity to serve the same ends” (ARONSTEIN, 1994, p. 219).

With these theoretical concepts in mind, I seek to analyze how the fictional narrative of the Four Branches of *Y Mabinogi* consists of a form of representation – in Hall’s conception – to Welsh collective identity. These tales compile a series of geographical, linguistic, literary and political registers of their time, but further, the overarching themes across the Four Branches all speak of unity, alliances, and conflicts in a manner that strongly resembles the diplomatic policies developed by Llewelyn I and Llewelyn II during the High Middle Ages. This study now turns to the literary text, aiming at understanding the ways in which this work of literature helped create, cement, and perpetuate the discourse which founded Welsh cultural identity.

2 FIRST AND THIRD BRANCHES: THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER IN MEDIEVAL WALES

In this section, I go over two branches of *Y Mabinogi* in order to discuss their common themes, which are related to political conflicts both among the kingdoms of Wales and between the Welsh and other groups – which here appear as exterior threats. In the tale of “Pwyll Prince of Dyfed”, a Welsh monarch is confronted by the supernatural king of Annfwn, the realm of the dead, and opposes foreign forces. “Manawydan Son of Llŷr” accounts for the fallout of a conflict between the Welsh and Irish rulers; Manawydan moves through the land with his companions and encounters strange, mystical dangers in his quest to secure the boundaries of his domain. Throughout this thesis, the fragments of the Welsh text of *Y Mabinogi* will be taken from Ifor William’s commented edition of the *White and Red Books*.

These are tales of struggle for maintaining, defining, or regaining territory; through supernatural events and strange encounters, the landscapes which were once familiar to the characters become devastated or hostile. The stories share similar themes, depicting the importance of marriage alliances, bonds of friendship, and forgiveness. Throughout this chapter, the overall themes and events of these two branches will be analyzed against the cultural and historical background of Wales during the High Middle Ages. At the start of this section, it seems important to point out S. Davies’ (2007) interpretation of the Four Branches as a unity which is pervaded by a lesson,

Throughout the Four Branches, therefore, the author conveys a scale of values which he commends to contemporary society, doing so by implication rather than by any direct commentary. The listeners are left to draw their own conclusions, and to realize that the image of a man alone, at the end of the Fourth Branch, with no wife and no heir, does not make for a promising future. (DAVIES, 2007, p. XXVI)

The tragedy of man – a ruler – with no wife and no heir, in the context in which these stories were produced, holds the clear message that unification under one leader in a feudal, patrilineal system is the path to survival; further, it seems like a call for reconciliation, forgiveness and for alliances which, although unlikely, may prove beneficial. With this

perspective, I will look at the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi* as tales that create a unified Wales through narrative. Through the medium of language – the representation – of a fictional land, *Y Mabinogi* imagine a past for the kingdom, creating a model Wales which could be achieved in the future if the individual rulers gathered under one monarch. It praises the characteristics which would befit a monarch in this ideal organization, and establishes clear consequences to the leaders to fail to perform their duties.

2.1 “Pwyll Prince of Dyfed”

Y Mabinogi opens with the tale of Pwyll; the First Branch tells of his rule over Dyfed and the event in which this fictional monarch solved a conflict over the borders between two supernatural kingdoms. Then, this branch describes how Pwyll met and wed his queen, Rhiannon, and the subsequent birth of their child – and future heir of Dyfed – Pryderi. The title “Pwyll Prince of Dyfed”, as with those in the other branches, was attached to the tale only in Lady Charlotte Guest’s 19th-century translation; the medieval texts were untitled, and known only as First, Second, Third, and Fourth Branches. It seems relevant to note, however, that Pwyll’s position as a ruler holds enough importance to the text that Lady Guest considered it appropriate to highlight his principedom in the very name of the First Branch.

Pwyll’s story brings from its early lines relevant points regarding the geopolitical organization of Wales; he rules over the lands called “the seven cantrefs of Dyfed” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 5). The word “cantref” was used for dividing land in both Wales and Ireland, and one cantref represented a hundred “vill” – the administrative divisions of shires and rural lands – which were not yet well defined units by the early thirteenth century (TURVEY, 2002). Those units are described by Turvey (2002) as lordships, that is, the domain of minor ruling families, which could sometimes attempt to act independently from the prince’s policies. As Sioned Davies explains, “the seven cantrefs of Dyfed were Cemais, Pebidiog, Rhos, Penfro, Daugleddyf, Emlyn, and Cantref Gwarthaf” (2007, p. 228); interestingly, not much else is mentioned within the *mabinogion* concerning the leadership of the cantrefs of Dyfed besides that they belonged to Pwyll – and were later inherited by his son, Pryderi. Here reigns the organization of many united under one leader, and a patrilineal succession. As noted by Fear (2016), Llewelyn ap Iorwerth adopted the Anglo-Norman line

of succession which held only one direct heir; Llewelyn favored his only son by his wife Joan over his first, natural born son, even though this went against Welsh custom and tradition³.

The First Branch opens with a hunting scene; Pwyll sets his dogs after a deer in Glyn Cuch – which might correspond to the region which is currently along the border between Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire. When the hunting party reaches their prey, Pwyll is confronted by a man who, because of Pwyll's offense of interfering with his hunt, will not greet him appropriately or identify himself. After the prince of Dyfed offers to compensate the stranger according to the latter's own rank, the man introduces himself as Arawn, the king of Annwfn – the Welsh underworld. At this point, Arawn reveals his condition for forgiving Pwll, saying,

‘A man whose territory is next to mine is forever fighting me. He is Hafgan, a king from Annwfn. By ridding me of that oppression—and you can do that easily—you will win my friendship.’ (...). I will make a firm alliance with you. What I shall do is to put you in my place in Annwfn, and give you the most beautiful woman you have ever seen to sleep with you every night, and give you my face and form so that no chamberlain nor officer nor any other person who has ever served me shall know that you are not me. All this’, he said, ‘from tomorrow until the end of the year, and then we shall meet again in this place.’ (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 4)⁴

Arawn declares that at the end of that year, they would meet again and Pwyll, wearing the appearance of the king of Annwfn, should confront Hafgan and kill him with one blow. During that period, Arawn would govern Dyfed and act indistinguishably from Pwyll. Trading places, each king moves to the other's realm; the man in Arawn's place is received with honour and is welcomed by all in Annwfn. He learns the ways of that court and the year passes in “friendship and conversation with companions until the night of the meeting” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 5). When the time finally comes for the combat to take place, Pwyll deals one fatal blow to Hafgan and proceeds to get the unanimous allegiance of the other nobles in Annwfn – stating clearly that those who do not submit

³ The Laws of Hywel Dda established that the first-born son of a ruler – legitimate or not – should be next in line; nonetheless, more than one heir could be appointed. Llewelyn ap Iorwerth bypassed Gruffydd, his first son, for Davydd, a legitimate son according to Norman custom (FEAR, 2016).

⁴ “Gwr yssyd gyuerbyn y gyuoeth a'm kyuoeth inheu yn ryuelu arnaf yn wastat. Sef yw hwnnw, Hafgan urenhin o Annwfn. Ac yr guaret gormes hwnnw y amaf, a hynny a elly yn haut, y keffy uygherennyd.” “Minnheu awnaf hynny,” heb ynteu, “yn llawen. A manac ditheu y mi pa furyf y gallwyf hynny.” “Managaf,” heb ynteu “Llyna ual y gelly; mi a wnaf a thi gedymdeithas gadarn. (...) “A hynny,” heb ef, “hyt ym penn y ulwydyn o'r dyd auory. An kynnadyl yna yn y lle hon.” (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 2-3)

willingly will be forced to do so by the sword. With this conflict settled, the two kings meet again and each returns to their original land – and both are equally satisfied with what the other has accomplished in their year of rule, acknowledging each other’s respect and care over the kingdom. Having confirmed their alliance, the rulers at last decide to join their kingdoms,

From that time on Pwyll and Arawn began to build up their friendship, and sent each other horses and hunting-dogs and hawks, and whatever treasure they thought would please the other. And because he had stayed that year in Annwfn, and had ruled there so successfully, and united the two realms through his courage and prowess, the name Pwyll, prince of Dyfed, fell into disuse, and he was called Pwyll Pen Annwfn from then on. (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 8)⁵

The two most prominent themes in the tale of Pwyll up to this point are place and friendship between rulers. Place, according to Kirsti Bohata (2004) is a space permeated by meaning; when analyzing the notion of place in the context of Welsh writings, the critic develops the argument that “the investment of a familiar landscape with enormous emotional and, often, political importance is also a clearly recognizable feature of Welsh culture, finding expression in a range of Welsh writing (...)” (BOHATA, 2004, p. 80). Dyfed was located in the southwest of Wales; Glyn Cuch, the place in which Pwyll and Arawn meet, is identified by Andrew Breeze (2012) in his extensive study of the geographical locations of *Y Mabinogi*. Breeze (2012) describes the valley of Cuch as a secluded and heavily forested area, a landscape consisting of “thick woods and deep valleys, it would be a place both for finding game and for losing one’s way” (BREEZE, 2012, p. 297); besides being a well established place for hunting, then, Cuch holds an overall atmosphere of mystery with which, Breeze (2012) argues, the author of *Y Mabinogi* would be familiar. Cuch is located east of Dyfed and thus closer to the region called the *marchia Wallie*, or the Welsh marches, where the rule of the Norman barons was strongest. As Stephenson (2019) explains, this region was controlled by distinct groups: many were lords of Anglo-Norman descent while others, in the northernmost regions, were generally still governed under Welsh law and custom.

⁵ “Ac o hynny allan, dechreu cadarnhau kedyndeithas y ryngthunt, ac anuon o pop un y gihd meirch a milgwn a hebogeu a fob gyfryw dlws, o'r a debygei bob un digrifhau medwl y gihd o honaw. Ac o achaws i drigiant ef y ulwydyn honno yn Annwbyn, a gwledychu o honaw yno mor Iwydannus, a dwyn y dwy dyrnas yn un drwy y ut dewred ef a'y uilwraeth, y diffygywys y enw ef ar Pwyll, Pendeuic Dyuet, ac y gelwit Pwyll Penn Annwbyn o hynny allan.” (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 8)

According to Stephenson (2019), the division between this frontier region on the south-east of Wales and the northern and western areas started in the mid-twelfth century. The latter was known as *pura Wallia*, which was the domain of native Welsh princes, while the Welsh marches were increasingly submitted to Norman lordship. This organization, as described by Cohen (2001), was present before the Edwardian conquest and conceptualized Wales as a bifurcated space. The Marches were an area of coexisting laws, habits, and institutions that form the native-governed Wales and the kingdom of the Normans. Then, as Cohen (2001) argues, “linguistically, architecturally, and culturally, the March was a mixed form, a bridge conjoining rather than assimilating differences—*biformis* like a centaur[...].” (p. 97). Bohata (2004) quotes Cohen’s studies to further explain the cultural configuration of the Welsh marches as extensive borderlands, permeable and instable, with a unique culture suited to the standards of hybridity as outlined by the field of Cultural Studies.

In light of this cultural context, the strange supernatural encounters which take place when a Welsh prince ventures east seem to work as a form of representation, processing and creating through language a culture that is neither fully Welsh nor Norman. Joseph Shack (2015) writes that the portrayal of the “Otherworld” – that is, *Annwfn*, the realm of the dead in Welsh literature – in the First and Third branches of *Y Mabinogi* is strongly connected to the political turmoil which took place in the Welsh marches during the Middle Ages. This analysis focuses primarily on the impact which the establishment of Norman rule over that frontier region had over the narrative contained in the four branches. The portrayal of the Otherworld, Shack (2015) argues, could be interpreted as reminiscent of the interactions between the Welsh and Norman peoples of the time. The world of the dead often appears in Welsh literature as an antagonistic, bellicose force – which, upon coming into contact with, Pwyll treads carefully and seeks to befriend.

Shack (2015) notes three aspects in which the Otherworld is described in the First Branch that hold particularly strong colonial connotations: the meeting between Pwyll and Arawn in an ambiguous frontier space, the portrayal of the court of *Annwfn* and its lack of supernatural elements, and finally the territorial disputes which Pwyll has to solve during his stay in the Otherworld. First, the location in which Pwyll and Arawn meet is purposefully left ambiguous, while previously the narrative places the prince of Dyfed securely within his own lands; the encounter occurs in a forest, where the frontiers between territories cannot be distinguished – which could recall the culture in the Welsh marches. To Shack (2015), the Otherworld permeates the borders of Dyfed, which possibly connects to anxieties

surrounding the delimitation of territories. Then, the second aspect of colonization described by the critic is the familiarity of Annwfn, which recalls a foreign but decidedly earthly court. This would place this supernatural kingdom simply as another form of human settlement – possibly Norman within Welsh lands. At last, in regards to the territorial conflict with Hafgan, Shack (2015) comments that the language used by Arawn to describe the threat reveals specific anxieties towards invasion by outside forces,

Hafgan is referred to as *gormes*, that is, an oppression, a word that carries invasive connotations elsewhere in medieval Welsh literature. For example, the *Trioedd Ynis Prydain*, recount “*Teir Gormes a doeth y’r Enys Hon. Ac nyt aeth vrun dracheuyn*” (Three Oppressions that came to this Island, and not one of them went back), which are listed as the Coryaniaid, described as coming from Arabia, the Geyddyl Ffichti, or Picts, and the Anglo-Saxons. (SHACK, 2015, p. 184)

The term *gormes* was previously established in Welsh literature as invasive, foreign oppression. Interestingly, however, it is not Arawn who represents this threatening force; the king of the Otherworld and his court have, nevertheless, been associated to the Normans. Taking that aspect into consideration, Pwyll and Arawn’s alliance could be connected to the idea of unifying *pura Wallia* and *marchia Wallie*; the relations established between these two leaders could be connected to the policies of centralization which would be raised under Llewelyn ap Gruffydd’s administration; Arawn is still Other to Pwyll, but as the rulers exchange territories for an year they come to the realization that their domains are stronger when united, leading to their decision to merge both kingdoms. Indeed, when describing the characteristics of Annwfn in the four branches of *Y Mabinogi*, Davies (2007) notices a contrast between this specific portrayal of the world of the dead with other depictions in Welsh and Irish literature. The critic remarks that the word Annwfn derives from *an* (‘in, inside’) + *dwfn* (‘world’) and was usually placed either on an island or under the earth. However, in the First and Second Branches the Otherworld appears to be a place within the Welsh principalities: inside the bounds of the kingdom of Dyfed in the tale of Pwyll, and at Harlech, on the north-west of Wales in the Second Branch (DAVIES, 2007).

Bohata (2004) describes that the Norman invasion of Wales employed “violent displacement of peoples from fertile land, the planting of foreign peasantry as well as alien overlords” (p. 8). Such practices of domination were most prevalent in the frontier region of the Welsh marches, which constituted some of the most productive land in Wales, with ample pastures in Brecon and the plentiful river of Usk (STEPHENSON, 2019). The First

Branch of *Y Mabinogi* reflects on this context as the Otherworld – portrayed elsewhere as the “inside world” – merges with the mortal court of Pwyll; there is no clear threshold between these two realms, for it is “other” but still a part of Wales. Interestingly, Stephenson’s (2019) chapter on the cultural and political environment in the Welsh marches during the High Middle Ages is called “The other Wales” – further implying the Marches complex position of being both within and alien to Wales. The first Norman excursions into the marches were initially the stepping stones to the latter conquest of the entirety of Wales; however, this resulted in the creation of borderlands which became an established hybrid area between the Norman dominated realms and the lands of native Welsh rulers, with an ethnically and culturally mixed population (STEPHENSON, 2019). By the end of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the marcher lords were absorbing Welsh tenants into their administrations; at the same time, intermarriage between Welsh ruling families and the Anglo-Norman barons had become a common practice. Consequently, many had developed loyalty to the marcher lords, not only getting used to their rule but thriving under it. Then, it is safe to say that a significant number of Welsh nobles were resistant to the attempts of unification employed by Llewelyn ap Iorwerth and Llewelyn ap Gruffydd.

While the Normans often sought to establish dominance upon the region, the March was also a target for Welsh rulers who intended to win power and renown by re-taking that territory – and, as stated by Stephenson, “it almost seems as though the southern March was being used as a place where Welsh rulers might demonstrate their power” (2019, p. 68). Contemporary records demonstrate that Llewelyn ap Iorwerth attempted to reincorporate the March by taking the town of Montgomery (to the north-east of Wales within Powys’ territory), Gwent, and Caerleon in violent incursions. Later, in 1257, Llewelyn ap Gruffydd would make an alliance with Gruffudd ap Madog, the ruler of northern Powys, and together they marched upon Hereford and Salop; in 1263, the same Llewelyn joined the lord of southern Powys in an incursion against other marcher lords. In observing the turbulent political environment of the borderlands, Stephenson considers that the military campaigns “may have been intended to drive both marcher lords and the royal government to negotiations which might result in a proper recognition of the power and status” (2019, p. 69) of Llewelyn ap Gruffydd, who had begun to call himself openly as prince of Wales and lord of Snowdon in 1262.

Therefore, the threat of *gormes* is crucial to the central conflict of this section of the First Branch, which could mirror the situation in Dyfed and Powys as the eastern Welsh

lands were raided by Norman and native forces alike. Llewelyn ap Gruffydd's campaign, however, was not simply a display of power, but an attempt to annex *marchia Wallia* under his rule. Thus, the focus of the first part of the tale is the importance of alliances to fend off the looming *gormes*, which may come from either side; with its uncertain boundaries, the setting of the First Branch is extremely reminiscent of the political environment of the Welsh Marches which were a transitional region between the decidedly Anglo-Norman east, and the land of native Welsh leaders to the west. At last, it is an external threat which unites the two leaders and the loyalty between them has lasting benefits for both kingdoms. Henceforward known as Pwyll Pen Annwfn (Pwyll Head of Annwfn), the leader of Dyfed expands his power through the alliance with the ruler of the Otherworld.

Another relevant point to the analysis of these events is the importance of names. As Gruffydd (1953) points out, Pwyll is never referred to by his name while ruling in Arawn's stead, being called only "he", "the man" or even "the man who was in Arawn's place". Sarah Sheehan (2009) explains this refusal to name Pwyll as an indication that, during the time in which he acted as the head of the Otherworld, he was not in his own flesh, implying a fundamental change in identity – or essence. In Sheehan's words, "in both the First and Fourth Branches, the text refuses to name by his own name a man who is 'in' a different *rith*, a different form or body" (2009, p. 331). Pwyll is not simply replacing Arawn; in that moment he is Arawn, and therefore the narrative refuses to call him by his original name. Therefore, *Y Mabinogi* demonstrates a peculiar preoccupation with naming and identities, which is important when considering the linguistic developments of Welsh identity – such as the word *Cymry*, used to outline the Welsh as a cohesive group, separate from the other peoples which surrounded them geographically.

After the resolution of this first episode, with the death of Hafgan and the lord of Dyfed becoming one with the Head of Annwfn – through friendship and title – there is a halt to the narrative, which starts anew with a separate plot. The First Branch then describes how Pwyll met Rhiannon and how they came to be married. One day, Pwyll is visiting one of his chief courts in Arberth; he is informed about a mound called Gorsedd Arberth, where one might see wonders if they sat long enough. Pwyll does so, and in time catches sight of a woman wearing a golden silk gown; she rides a white horse at a seemingly slow pace, but when anyone tries to approach her, she remains out of reach no matter how great a speed one would use to follow. Pwyll himself then takes up the pursuit, but he gets no closer than any of the others; at last, he calls out to her: "Maiden," he said, "for the sake of the man you love

most, wait for me”” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 10). Then, she at last stops. She waits for Pwyll to approach, introducing herself as Rhiannon, daughter of Hyfaidd Hen; the woman declares she was to be married against her will, and she refused her ascribed husband because of her love for Pwyll. The lord of Dyfed is fascinated by Rhiannon’s beauty. He accepts to meet her in a year’s time in the court of Hyfaidd, where they would feast together.

Discussing the symbolic implications of Rhiannon’s appearance in the First Branch, Jessica Hemming (1998) claims that the author of *Y Mabinogi* likely drew this episode from mythological sources and folkloric material about the British goddess Rigatona (sometimes associated with the Continental divinity Epona, whose main attributes were horses). Moreover, the unexplainable speed of her mount could be linked to the Otherworld. Hemming explains that the text uses the word *cerdded* to describe the steed’s walking speed, which could mean "walk, pace, motion, journey, career, course, track, state, condition" (1998, p. 33); the focus here is in the appearance, as the text specifies that “*kerdet araf guastat oed gan y march* "the horse had a slow, even walk/pace/motion” (ibid.) to the observers. Then, the horse seems to be moving slowly, which could imply a distortion and space and time characteristic of an encounter with the Welsh Otherworld.

Adding to the time distortion, which indicates an interstitial space between the mortal world and the Otherworld, it is interesting to notice that *Gorsedd* (the hills, the mounds) were traditionally understood as fairy dwellings (GRUFFYDD, 1953), and thus are often the locations where wondrous events take place. Furthermore, the space of the *Gorsedd* is extremely significant to Welsh cultural expression; Alan Fear (2016) offers a translation to the term which diverges from that of Gruffydd (1953), as *Gorsedd* can mean “throne”. Fear (2016) demonstrates that these thrones were the location where the *Eisteddfodau* were held, gathering people to celebrate bardic tradition. These were competitions of poetry and music, the first records of which date from the twelfth century in the south-west of Wales. Gruffydd (1958) argues that what distinguishes the people of Annwfn from the mortal people of Dyfed and Gwynedd is that they hold an intrinsic enchantment (*hud*), which manifests in two ways: either a mysterious power, such as Rhiannon’s with her deceptively fast horse, or “some malevolent magic which enables its possessor to shift his shape and to play tricks on his enemy” (GRUFFYDD, 1958, p. 22). Arawn demonstrates this latter power and uses it to defeat Hafgan. Once more, Dyfed and Annwfn seep into each other; while elsewhere in *Y Mabinogi* a supernatural event such as Rhiannon’s appearance is heralded by the resounding sound of thunder, here there is no indication that something unusual is about to take place.

At this point, there are no boundaries between the mortal Dyfed and the world of the dead, and even if Annfwns inhabitants hold some sort of enchantment, they inevitably mingle with the mortals and coexist in the same space.

When the appointed time comes, Pwyll gathers ninety-nine horsemen and sets off to meet Rhiannon; Pwyll and his revenue are welcomed into Hyfaidd's court with honors and riches, and they eat and carouse as it was the custom. Soon, a young auburn-haired man enters the hall, wearing a garment of brocaded silk. He approaches Pwyll to ask for a favour, to which the lord of Dyfed promptly answers, to Rhiannon's dismay: "Whatever you ask of me, as long as I can get it, it shall be yours" (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 12). The man is revealed to be Gwawl son of Clud, Rhiannon's assigned groom, and he asks to marry her and for the provisions Pwyll had received. Pwyll is in no position to deny this request, as he had given his word; Rhiannon, however, would not accept that fate and lays out a plan for them to circumvent Pwyll's promise.

She hands him a bag with the following instructions: she would arrange to meet Gwawl in a year from that day, when she would marry him; Pwyll was to be there, disguised in ragged clothes, with ninety-nine horsemen hidden away. Pwyll would enter the court during the celebrations and request for nothing but to fill the bag with food. Rhiannon declares that 'if all the food and drink in these seven cantrefs were put into it, it would be no fuller than before' (*ibid.*); when anyone questioned this request, Pwyll was to say that the bag would never be filled unless an extremely powerful nobleman got up and treaded down the food in the bag with both feet, saying 'enough has been put in here'. Then, when Gwawl followed these instructions to have the bag filled at last, Pwyll was to trap him inside and call upon his horsemen.

And so, these steps are arranged. Pwyll returns to Dyfed to wait out the year, while Gwawl sets off to his realm. In a year's time, they meet once again in Hyfaidd Hen's court, with Pwyll disguising his form with wretched rags. He approaches Gwawl during the feast, in an exchange similar to when they first met. The events follow as Rhiannon had described: no matter how much food they bring, Pwyll's bag can never be full. So Gwawl goes to tread down the food, and is trapped as soon as his feet are inside the bag, turning Gwawl head over heels and quickly tying the knots in the strings. Pwyll's horsemen enter the hall, one by one asking what was in the bag and striking it a blow, to which others answer: a badger.

They proceed to make a game out of it, calling it ‘Badger in the Bag’. At last, Gwawl relents; he is released with the promise that no claim or vengeance should be sought.

Rhiannon and Pwyll return to Dyfed together the next day and rule the land successfully for the next two years⁶. During the third year, however, Pwyll’s vassals approach him, worried for the lack of an heir to Dyfed; they meet at Preseli, where the counselors try to convince their lord to divorce Rhiannon, Pwyll asks that the subject is delayed for a year. Before that time elapsed, a son is born to them in Arberth. Rhiannon falls asleep with the newborn baby and her ladies – who were meant to keep watch over them – drift off to sleep as well. By morning, the boy has disappeared; fearing the repercussions, the women stage a crime: killing some young animals, they smear Rhiannon with blood and throw the bones by her side, claiming she had devoured her son. Although the court demands Pwyll to divorce her, the lord of Dyfed instead ascribes her punishment, which Rhiannon accepts: she is to stay at that court in Arberth for seven years, sitting next to a mounting block outside the gate. When anyone approaches her, she must “tell the whole story to anyone whom she thought might not know it, and offer to carry guests and strangers on her back to the court if they permitted it” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 17), but rarely would anyone allow themselves to be carried by her. In regards to Rhiannon’s punishment, it is interesting to note,

Rhiannon adopts the behavior of a horse because as the equine goddess Rigantona she is as much mare as woman. The logic behind this argument appears to be that Rhiannon is forced to take on the attributes of her hippomorphic state when, in apparently treating her child with bestial ferocity, she proves herself less than entirely human (HEMMING, 1998, p. 31)

While Hemming (1998) establishes a connection between the inhuman nature of the supposed crime and the punishment – acting as an animal –, Gruffydd (1953) considers that these events are unconnected, possibly stemming from different versions of the tale that have been entwined by the author of the Four Branches. Nevertheless, the instances which will be analyzed in the section concerning the Fourth Branch depict similar patterns of punishment could support Hemming’s point. As it will be discussed in the next chapter, making one who – in Rhiannon’s case, supposedly – committed a crime against the human order to act in the semblance of an animal is a recurrent theme in *Y Mabinogi*.

⁶ Pwyll’s first wife is no longer mentioned in the tale after the appearance of Rhiannon.

Fortunately, the boy's whereabouts are discovered before the end of Rhiannon's sentence. He was being raised by Teyrnon Twrf Liant, who was lord over Gwent Is Coe, and his wife; they had found a small boy in a cloak of brocaded silk by their door one May evening and had been raising the child in as if he was their own. He was named Gwri Wallt Euryn – meaning Gwri of Golden Hair. The boy grows in an unusually fast pace, being as tall and strong as a six-year-old by his second year. By the time the Gwri was four years old, his resemblance to Pwyll was striking; recognizing their similarities, Teyrnon concludes he had the son of the lord of Dyfed under his care and is seized by grief because of how wrong it was for him to keep another man's son. He consults his wife, and they agree to return the boy to his parents; they reach Pwyll's court and meet Rhiannon still by the gate, carrying out her punishment. During the feast, Teyrnon reports the story and everyone acknowledges it to be true, because of how closely the boy resembled Pwyll. Rhiannon then declares "what a relief from my anxiety if that were true" (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 20). Henceforth, the boy is named Pryderi son of Pwyll Pen Annwfn – after the word *pryder* (anxiety) (S. DAVIES, 2007), and is fostered by a man named Pendaran Dyfed⁷.

The tale comes to a close as Pryderi reaches adulthood, and Pwyll passes away leaving his son to rule Dyfed; Pryderi's later territorial conquests are mentioned in passage, but should not be overlooked as they demonstrate the expansion of his reach and the annexation of neighboring territories. The ending establishes that the bond between Teyrnon Twrf Liant and the lord of Dyfed had been strengthened; the fact that Pryderi was fostered by another man also drives the message of union forward, as it was a common practice for Welsh kings – specially Llewelyn ap Iorwerth – to send their children away to be warded by other trusted nobles in a demonstration of good faith. The First Branch ends with Dyfed as a prosperous and growing kingdom, strengthened by its internal alliances.

The connection between the two episodes which constitute this first tale of *Y Mabinogi* is tenuous, as they seem to be completely separated instances in the life of Pwyll. Gruffydd (1953) considers that they could have been, at one point in the development of these narratives, two separate units or even two independent branches. It is notable that the First Branch begins with the formula "Pwyll, prince of Dyfed, was lord of the seven cantrefes of Dyfed, and on a day he was in Arberth, which was a chief court of his"; the latter part of

⁷ W. J. Gruffydd (1953) considers that Pendaran Dyfed could be translated as "Great Lord of Dyfed"; this character may have been described as Pryderi's father in some of the source material for *Y Mabinogi*. To Gruffydd (1953), the creation of a character called Pendaran Dyfed separate from Pwyll may be interpreted as an attempt of the author to conciliate diverging traditions about Pryderi's paternity.

this sentence is replicated as the second episode starts with “*A threigylgweith yn oed yn arberth priflys idaw*” (GRUFFYDD, 1953, p. 23). These introductory statements in two specific sections of the First Branch and the renewed description of Arberth, along with the missing connection in plot between the first and second parts, are the main arguments for Gruffydd’s hypothesis. If one considers *Y Mabinogi* to be the branches of Pryderi’s life, the opening tale in the First Branch would be his “conception story”, a narrative pattern identified by Gruffydd (1953) in Irish sagas and folk stories in which the birth and conception of a hero are narrated in a tale prefacing the hero’s life and adventures.

When reconstructing a prior version of the tale of Pwyll, Gruffydd (1958) does not mention Pwyll and Arawn’s encounter and the subsequent exchange of places in order to defeat Hafgan; rather, his account of early registers of the First Branch only include Pwyll’s marriage to Rhiannon and the turmoil that followed. If, in fact, the opening episodes of the First Branch were a latter addition to the narrative, the very core of the story changes. In a version in which Arawn never befriends the lord of Dyfed, the conflict with Gwawl effectively starts a “feud” (in Gruffydd’s words)⁸ between the Welsh kingdom and Annwn which is never solved, and emphasizes their differences. With the addition of the first meeting and alliance, Pwyll and Arawn essentially become one – therefore implying that both cultures and territories have merged, and every opposition which emerges after that is a threat which comes from within: not a foreign force, but a ruler of equal value who holds diverging interests. Then, it is possible to conclude that the author of the final version of *Y Mabinogi* (the one registered in the manuscripts) focused on alliances rather than conflict; internal fighting still exists, but the boundaries between the Welsh domains and the neighboring foreign peoples were not easily outlined. It certainly echoes the Welsh-Norman relationships throughout the formation of *marchia Wallie*, and the enduring efforts of centralizing Welsh government employed by Gwynedd.

Further, Gruffydd (1953) explains that this section of the First Branch conveniently joins two divergent traditions which appeared elsewhere in Welsh narratives, revealing how Pwyll earned the title of Head of Annwn. To the critic, Pwyll and Arawn were once separate characters, but become indistinguishable from one another at a certain point in the First Branch – meaning, the two leaders became one. The title of Head of Annwn is passed down

⁸ “Feud” is used by Gruffydd in the sense of “quarrel”, “dispute”, “clash”. The word is emphasized here to demonstrate how the folkloric version reported by Gruffydd had the conflict among the Welsh peoples at the core of its narrative.

to Pryderi, who could then fulfill two narrative traditions: that he succeeded his father as the lord of Dyfed, and that he was the son of the ruler of the Otherworld. Beyond explaining an already established literary tradition, the ramifications of this tale are that Pwyll and Arawn merged their kingdoms, which left a strong legacy to the heir Pryderi. The centralization of government ensured their survival, successfully fending off *gormes* – and then, in a feudal fashion, the male child succeeds his father as lord of Dyfed and Annwfn.

Moreover, as Pwyll and Arawn effectively merge, it can be argued that the First Branch's narrative raises relevant elements concerning the new cultural identity which was developed specifically in the Welsh marches, at the converging point for Welsh and Norman cultures. Cohen (2006) explains that the writings of Gerald of Wales noticeably described this middle location, making note of three separate “races” in a garrison: *Normanni*, *Angli*, and *nostril*. These corresponded to the Normans, the English, and “our men” – the marchers; the Welsh and the Irish were, to Gerald of Wales, a *gens barbara*, or barbaric race (COHEN, 2006, p. 81). It is possible to argue, then, that literary texts of that time already conveyed the notion that the conjoined kingdoms created a new identity, which is significant for the context of the Welsh marches and the overreaching theme of union within *Y Mabinogi*.

At last, a review of Andrew Breeze's comments on the locations of *Y Mabinogi* adds some meaning to the portrayal of authority through Pwyll. The lord is summoned by his counselors to the Preseli Hills in Dyfed which, according to Breeze (2012), was considered a neutral territory to both parties because it consisted of uninhabited fields. At no point in the narrative is Pwyll's authority questioned, except for this moment. Breeze (2012) believes this instance to betray some weakness in Pwyll's rule; while the lords in charge of Gwynedd, such as Bendigeidfran and Math, do not leave their courts unless they need to go to war, Pwyll is drawn away from his seat of power. Thus, the Preseli Hills “bring out the relative insecurity of royal power in Dyfed, in contrast to its unquestioned authority in Gwynedd. Rural space has a political aspect throughout the *Four Branches*” (BREEZE, 2012, p. 300-301). In conclusion, Pwyll is successful in the integration of Dyfed and Annwfn, but the subtle comparison to Gwynedd implies the power of *pura Wallia*. The significance of rural spaces will be further explored in the next subsection, which discusses Manawydan's journey through Dyfed and England, and the dangers encountered in the middle locations.

2.2 “Manawydan Son of Llŷr”

The Third Branch of *Y Mabinogi* deals with the aftermath of the conflict portrayed in the Second Branch. In this section, I seek to outline themes of unification within the narrative of the Third Branch, and further, to draw a parallel between the story of Manawydan and some aspects of the tale of Owein in “The Lady of the Fountain” – one of the Three Welsh Romances contained in *Y Mabinogi* – as analysed by Susan Aronstein. The critic describes the journeys of the Arthurian knight Owein in strange and dangerous lands, and the prevalence of alliances and marriages as ways of protecting the territory from external threats. Similar elements are presented in the Third Branch, as Manawydan ventures through a familiar yet unrecognizable Wales in an attempt to secure his lands.

After a war with the Irish king Matholwch, Manawydan the son of Llŷr returns to Britain with his companions; they bury the head of his brother Bendigeidfran on the hill called Gwynfryn, in London, facing the direction of France. At this point, Manawydan acknowledges that he has lost his territories, having no place to which he could return. Pryderi offers Rhiannon’s – his mother’s – hand in marriage to Manawydan, granting him the seven catrefts of Dyfed through this alliance. Having thus strengthened their friendship, Manawydan, Pryderi, Rhiannon, and Cigfa (who was Pryderi’s wife) live in harmony in a prosperous land, such as “they had never seen a place more pleasant to live in, nor better hunting ground, nor land more abundant in honey and fish” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 36). However, soon Dyfed turns from this blooming scenery to a devastated environment: the flocks and herds disappear, there are no buildings or living beings within sight. Every court’s halls are found empty, “desolate, uninhabited, without people, without animals in them; their own companions had disappeared, with nothing known of their whereabouts— only the four of them remained” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 37).

For a time, they continue to roam, hunt, and feast as they had been when Dyfed was populated; when the provisions they had at last waned, they began to live from fish and hunted meat from the wild animals – the only beings which remained. At the end of the second year, Manawydan determines that they should head to England and seek means to make their living. Settling at Hereford, Manawydan takes on the craft of making pommels and saddles, and becomes so skilled that the locals would only purchase what he made. The other saddlers in the region threaten Manawydan and his companions with death, making them flee to another town, where they begin to forge shields. As before, the group soon is

made to leave, as the locals wished to buy their craft exclusively; the same event repeats in a different location, in which Manawydan and Pryderi make shoes.

At this point, Manawydan decides to go back to Dyfed, where they spend another year in Arberth hunting to survive as they had before. One morning, their hunting hounds enter a thicket, only to run off again in fear; as the hunters approach the woods, they see a gleaming-white wild boar. They give chase, and the animal leads the hunters to a mysterious tower which stands where previously there had been no building. Against Manawydan's best judgment, Pryderi enters the fort and finds it empty, except for "a well with marble-work around it. At the edge of the well there was a golden bowl fastened to four chains, over a marble slab, and the chains reached up to the sky, and he could see no end to them" (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 40).

When Pryderi touches the bowl, compelled by its beauty, he finds himself unable to move or speak. Rhiannon follows, and meets the same fate. Manawydan and Cigfa wait for their companions until evening; seeing that they did not return, both again travel to England and take up the craft of shoemaking once more. They return to Arberth after a while (once they are threatened by the local crafters who were losing profit), but this time Manawydan carries wheat, which he sows across three fields. These crops flourish and grow ripe; as Manawydan is about to reap one of them, the wheat withers overnight. The next morning, a second field has been laid to waste. Manawydan then watches over the third field, and witnesses an army of mice coming to destroy it. Enraged, the man charges towards the mice and catches the fattest, slowest one; trapping the mouse inside a glove, Manawydan takes it to court with plans of killing it by hanging, as it was the lawful⁹ punishment for thieves, even against Cigfa's advice.

The execution is to take place on Gorsedd Arberth, but Manawydan's endeavour is interrupted, consecutively, by three holy men, from the lowest to the highest position in religious hierarchy: a cleric, then a priest, and finally, a bishop. While the first two talk to Manawydan and move away, the third offers him increasing amounts of treasure for the release of that mouse; Manawydan only concedes when the bishop agrees to freeing Rhiannon and Pryderi, and removing the magic enchantment that had turned the seven cantrefs of Dyfed into desolate land. The bishop then reveals, upon the demand of

⁹ Sioned Davies (2007) makes a note that, according to the Laws of Hywel Dda, theft would be punished with a fine of seven pounds or, failing that, with banishment.

Manawydan, that the mouse was actually his wife in animal shape, who came to destroy the fields of Dyfed in revenge for the acts of Pryderi in the First Branch; the mice which accompanied her were the bishop's advisors. The plot is unveiled as such,

‘I am Llwyd son of Cil Coed, and it is I who placed the enchantment on the seven cantrefs of Dyfed, and I did so to avenge Gwawl son of Clud, out of friendship for him; and I took revenge on Pryderi because Pwyll Pen Annwfn played Badger in the Bag with Gwawl son of Clud, and he did that unwisely at the court of Hyfaidd Hen. And having heard that you were living in the land, my retinue came to me and asked me to turn them into mice so that they could destroy your corn. The first night they came alone. And they came the second night too, and destroyed the two fields. But the third night my wife and the ladies of the court came to me and asked me to transform them too, and I did that. My wife was pregnant. And had she not been pregnant you would not have caught her. But since she was, and you did, I will give you Pryderi and Rhiannon, and I will remove the magic and enchantment from Dyfed. I have told you who she is, now let her go.’ (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 45)

According to this description, Llwyd's resentment for Pwyll and his offspring festered, so much so that not only he but his whole court wished to lay waste to Pryderi's land; Manawydan only frees Llwyd's wife upon receiving a promise that no other spell or enchantment would ever be cast upon Dyfed again, and that no more harm would be inflicted upon Pryderi and Rhiannon. Llwyd uses a magical wand to bring his wife back to human form, and finally restores Dyfed to its former state: populated by people and herds, and houses. This is the end of the Third Branch, which closes in a peculiar manner: the last lines announce that “this story was called the Mabinogi of the Collar and the Hammer” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 46). The collar and hammer refer to the manner in which Rhiannon and Pryderi were imprisoned. As S. Davies (2007) explains, the “gate-hammer” used to trap Pryderi recalls the Welsh word *gordd*, which would be understood as a handle for knocking, attached to the door. The Welsh word for collar here is *mynweir*, which recalls the proper name Gwair, a prisoner of the Otherworld who appears elsewhere in Welsh literature, among the triads (S. DAVIES, 2007). These two objects reinforce the imagery surrounding the entanglement and humiliation of Pryderi and Rhiannon.

In a folkloric exploration of the Third Branch, W. J. Gruffydd claims that Manawydan is likely a character that was already present in other Welsh literary narratives such as the *Triads*; a clear evidence for this statement is that Manawydan is named as one of

the *Three Golden Shoemakers* and one of the *Three Undemanding Chieftains*¹⁰ (S. DAVIES, 2007). Moreover, Gruffydd (1953) demonstrates that this tale carries traits of Irish and English traditions. First, Manawydan's name was likely derived from the Irish myth of Manannán – a trickster entity, who otherwise shares no traits with the Welsh character. Second, the narrative progression in the Third Branch correlates to the *Eustace Legends*, or *The Life of St. Eustatius*, in which a man loses his wife, his children, and all of his property, proceeding to live as a common laborer for fifteen years (GRUFFYDD, 1953). The story of Saint Eustatius originates from French and English traditions. Then, it is possible to affirm that a diverse set of cultural and literary elements converge to create the contents of the Third Branch. It is clear that the tale of Manawydan results from a time when Welsh literature had inevitably touched (and had been touched by) the culture of other peoples which populated Britain during the High Middle Ages.

Considering such cultural exchange, it is important to point out that the tale of Manawydan shares similar aspects to the tale of “Owain, or The Lady of the Fountain”, presented among the Three Welsh Romances in *Y Mabinogi*; this “romance” has been paralleled by Susan Aronstein (1994) to a poem from French literary tradition, namely, Chrétien de Troyes’ *Yvain*. I will now explore the resemblance between the tales of Manawydan and Owain, and demonstrate how both display similar themes connected to unification as crucial to the safety of a kingdom. Susan Aronstein’s (1994) study on “The Lady of the Fountain” starts by explaining how policies and laws seeking to centralize power in Wales were often reinforced and materialized through literary narrative. The critic describes how the law tracts of *Cyfraith Hywel*, passed by Llewelyn ap Iorweth and dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were an attempt of the native rulers to create a Wales that was unified both legally and narratively. These tracts were created with the objective of centralizing and solidifying power, and the text itself recalled the myth of Hywel Dda, the king of all Wales, in order to advocate for a kingdom that gathered under one leader. According to Aronstein (1994),

While the law tracts posit this ideal by harking back to a time when it already existed – the days of Hywel Dda and a strong, unified Wales – the Arthurian romances chronicle its formation. These tales are narratives of unification; they adapt the standard romance episode, “the hero's encounter with the otherworld,” to emphasize the otherworld's vulnerability to both

¹⁰ The word which S. Davies translates as “undemanding” is *lledv* or *lledyf*. W. J. Gruffydd (1953) points to other possible meanings to the word: passive, gentle, humble, and ungrasping.

internal and external threat and then relate the tale of how these otherworldly realms come to understand the fact that they must throw in their lot with Arthur if they are to survive (ARONSTEIN, 1994, p. 221)

In short, the critic perceives the Arthurian tales of The Three Welsh Romances – such as “The Lady of the Fountain” – as a narrativization of the past, looking back to an idealized Wales which should be a model to the future. This imagined past created a model to which that people could aspire: the promise of a glorious future for a united Wales that, under the protection of a sole monarch, had enough strength to protect its borders from those who would seek to breach them. In an analysis of the chronicles and literature of Gerald of Wales, Cohen (2001) describes that Wales was often portrayed by medieval authors as a pathway to a fantastic elsewhere, to the point in which King William II imagined Wales as a bridge leading towards Ireland. Then, in Cohen’s perspective, the whole Welsh territory was symbolically understood by Latin writers of that time as “an ambiguous middle location caught between a distant, dominant, domestic center and a proximate, absolute, alien outland” (2001, p. 95), which the critic calls “the borderlands”. The space of the borderlands is populated by wondrous and dangerous hybrid creatures, and a stage to strange events. These two readings, if conjoined, demonstrate that the texts within *Y Mabinogi* present Wales as a territory with still ambiguous political borders, and in that space emerge supernatural dangers which could be fend off by unification. It is within this environment, the landscape where the frontiers are uncertain, that Manawydan and his companions encounter the fort that enchants and imprisons them.

Inside the fort portrayed in the Third Branch there is a water-well, sometimes described as a fountain. It has marble-work around it, and at its edge there is a golden bowl fastened to four chains over a marble slab, and upon touching the bowl, Pryderi and Rhiannon are glued to the stone by a magical effect. The presence of such fountain further marks this space as an interstitial location. There is a striking similarity between the sequence of events which lead the characters to fountains, or rather water wells, in the Third Branch of *Y Mabinogi* and in the Arthurian tale of “The Lady of the Fountain”; Carl Lindahl (2000) also notes the strong resemblance in the descriptions of these water wells, as both contain marble slabs and the process of pouring water over that stone triggers some supernatural event. These magical occurrences only take place outside the boundaries of the kingdom, which has led critics to connect the otherworldly threats with the cultural clash at the frontier spaces.

Rebekah Fowler (2016) makes an analysis of the fountain episode in “The Lady of the Fountain”, arguing that the bleed of the fantastical into the mundane which takes place when the characters interact with the water well stands for the interaction between cultures at the borderlands. The critic suggests that the appearance of the fountain in “The Lady of the Fountain” demonstrates a “interstitial, liminal, middle landscape into which the chaos of the wilderness and the will of civilized, urban man converge, creating conflict, (...) which will lead to disruption, and then to a new order” (FOWLER, 2016, p. 68). This analysis also connects the mystical and ambiguous landscape to the rural areas – meaning that the farther away one moves from the urban centers, the beacon on order, the more likely they are to wonder into a place of supernatural dangers.

Moreover, the cultural developments of the twelfth century at times accentuated the binary division of urban and rural areas, the first being the progressive, civilized world, while the second constituted the wild, marginal spaces. Aronstein explains that the Normans would characterize the Welsh-dominated rural areas and its population – “whose economic base was pillage and plunder and who lived on a diet of milk and meat (as opposed to the grain of a stable, agriculturally based society) – as a ‘wild people living in a wild country’” (2005, p. 144). Interestingly, while *Y Mabinogi* also portrays the rural spaces as dangerous, undefined areas, this is not a marginal location; it lies inside the Welsh territory. In Stephenson’s (2019) description of the Welsh marches, the English dominated areas would usually show a greater degree of urban development – with markets and fairs – than the Welsh lordships to the north. The historian also notes that Gwynedd, in *pura Wallia*, was a blooming centre of commerce under both Llewelyn ap Iorwerth and Llewelyn ap Gruffydd. Then, once more there seems to be an implication that a centralized government is more able to provide protection than a divided land with uncertain boundaries.

When looking to the Third Branch, the appearance of the water well seems to hold similar implications. The cantrefs given to Manawydan in Dyfed, which are heavenly landscapes at first, soon become desolate through the curse of Llwyd thus driving Manawydan and Pwyll out of the territory. Llwyd’s actions are meant to avenge Gwawl’s humiliation by Pwyll in the First Branch, demonstrating how the past conflict still affects and destabilizes the order. Furthermore, the curse has deep repercussions to the physical land; recalling Bohata’s (2004) considerations about the importance of place within Welsh literature, it is interesting to note that Dyfed becomes unrecognizable to those who inhabited that location prior to the curse. In Bohata’s (2004) analysis, the understanding of place is

produced through the interactions of language, community and landscape. When there is a fracture in the relationship between the people and the place – such as being violently removed from a certain territory – a pervading sense of loss may ensue. This experience may occur even in communities which have been invaded but remain in the same geographical location, as the appropriation of one’s homeland or alienation from one’s culture inevitably breaks the idea of place: that is, cultural connection to a physical space to which memory and meaning have been ascribed (BOHATA, 2004).

The curse that falls upon Dyfed undeniably disrupts the relation between the characters and the land, as they see their resources wane to the point in which they need to search for a living elsewhere. Manawydan and his companions lose their sense of place as the landscape they inhabit is altered beyond recognition; thus, the whole of Dyfed becomes the borderlands, as it is now pervaded by an outside force – the curse – and therefore, it is dangerous. The fact that this is a hybrid, undefined space is what allows for the appearance of the fort and the water well; then, as Aronstein (1994) describes in the analysis of “The Lady of the Fountain”, such supernatural event emphasizes that an unprotected land is especially vulnerable to violence both from external and internal threats. Consequently, unification must be achieved to ensure stability and order. At first, Manawydan cannot properly fulfill the role of a leader; he wanders outside of Wales, never settling for too long and constantly faces hostility. He loses his wife, step-son, and his domains. It is only upon returning to Dyfed and keeping watch over the land that he is able to identify and end the curse which had afflicted his territory – and, as Gruffydd describes, “through his own cunning regained all he had lost” (1953, p. 74).

Manawydan’s role as a leader should be further analyzed in order to understand how the Third Branch portrays authority. As previously mentioned, this character appears in the Welsh Triads as one of the *Three Undemanding Chieftains*. In Gruffydd’s (1953) analysis, Manawydan is depicted as a patient, tolerant, and pacific leader. Having endured all the tribulations in his journey to England, Manawydan displays a humble disposition towards manual labour, which could be connected to Christian values. Moreover, Manawydan never rises against his cousin Caswallon, who had taken over the throne of Britain after the death of Bendigeidfran by the end of the Second Branch. When Pryderi grants Manawydan the lands of Dyfed, he claims: “‘Your cousin Caswallon is king over the Island of the Mighty; and although he has done you wrong,’ [...] ‘you have never claimed land or territory — you are one of the Three Undemanding Chieftains’” (*THE*

MABINOGION, 2007, p. 36). If Pryderi mentions such title, there must be an event which establishes Manawydan as a *lledyf* lord. To Gruffydd (1953), this could either be an episode prior to *Y Mabinogi* or the action in the Third Branch itself. Looking to the events in the Third Branch, being considered a *lledyf* leader could hold negative implications. It deems Manawydan an inert and indolent ruler whose duty was, in fact, to challenge Caswallon when he took his nephew's throne; he fails to complete his obligations and instead acquiesces to being deprived of territories. As Gruffydd points out, "both the triad and Pryderi's statement emphasize Manawydan's neglect to claim his own or other property" (1953, p. 83).

This is especially significant when reflecting of the background of Dyfed and the Welsh marches. As Stephenson's (2019) observations show, the marches were inflicted with constant military raids; during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, "Welsh onslaughts on marcher territories were often desperate attempts to regain lands lost to incoming Anglo-Norman lords and their forces" (STEPHENSON, 2019, p. 66). Particularly under Llewelyn ap Gruffydd's reign, such incursions into the march sought to regain territory and demand recognition of his status and power as Prince of Wales. It is not surprising, then, that Manawydan's nature can be interpreted both as peaceful and passive – the latter being regarded as an unfitting disposition for a ruler. Although Pryderi does not seem to openly reprehend Manawydan for not confronting Caswallon and taking back his rightful place, the narrative is only solved once Manawydan takes charge of his territories. Dyfed was acknowledged by medieval writers as one of the most productive areas of south Wales (STEPHENSON, 2019), and thus to leave it to devastation could be a great failure on Manawydan's part.

Moreover, the instigator of these troubles is Llwyd son of Cil Coed, who comes to avenge the insult done to Gwawl by Pwyll in the First Branch. His drive for revenge and its catastrophic consequences further emphasize the importance of friendship bonds as an overarching theme within *Y Mabinogi*. Ultimately, the humiliation inflicted upon Gwawl results in greater harm for those who caused the offense; not only are Rhiannon and Pryderi trapped as Gwawl was, but the whole of Dyfed is affected. The manner in which these events are mirrored in the First and Third branches seems to imply that the harm done to another can forever be a looming presence if not properly addressed: as Gwawl is shamed and trapped, so are Rhiannon and Pryderi by the end of the Third Branch. Considering that it is

Llwyd, Gwawl's ally, who comes to avenge that initial offense, the narrative's focus on friendship and loyalty is highlighted once more.

Aronstein (1994) notes that "The Lady of the Fountain" establishes a clear connection between marriage alliances and protection from danger; it emphasizes that unprotected lands can be easily overtaken, and points to centralization of government under King Arthur as the only way to assure safety and order. Arthur represents the possibility of a native ruler who can protect the land from annexation by an alien overlord; in regards to the overall theme of "The Lady of the Fountain", the critic concludes: "better the Welshman with the legitimate claim than the marauding Norman" (ARONSTEIN, 2004, p. 233). Looking at the tale of Manawydan, similar ideas seem to be implied in the narrative – as Manawydan is granted lands through his matrimony to Rhiannon, which also solidifies his friendship with Pryderi and thus imbues Manawydan with the responsibility to protect that territory.

However, the Four Branches present a more nuanced idea of "Welsh" and "Norman" than the one Aronstein (1994) observes in the Three Welsh Romances. As previously discussed, the First Branch narrates how the leader of Dyfed also became the head of the Otherworld, thus joining the decidedly Welsh realm and the more ambiguous kingdom, that is both alien and familiar to Wales – which has been equated by Shack (2015) to the Welsh marches and the Norman lords who ruled the region. From its formation in the late eleventh century through the thirteenth century, the south and eastern areas of Wales developed a singular culture at the frontier of the Welsh and Norman administrations – but beyond the *marchia Wallie*, intermarriage and alliances had taken place from the early stages of the Norman invasion. Llewelyn ap Iorwerth himself famously married princess Joan, the illegitimate daughter of King John Lackland, in 1205; their matrimony was arranged after a series of diplomatic steps, in which Llewelyn signed a treaty with King John in 1201 agreeing to pay homage to the English crown in return for confirmation of his right to the lands he held (ARONSTEIN, 1994, p. 219) – creating a delicate bond with the Norman dynasty that ultimately contributed to forward Llewelyn's policies of unification for Wales.

The alliance was undoubtedly beneficial to the Anglo-Norman interests, as it guaranteed peace in the Marches, keeping Llewelyn from marching upon them. Such truce allowed for England to pursue other domains in France and Ireland. Although these treaties were broken and reinstated a few times during 1211 and 1218, the Welsh prince ultimately

had some leverage to negotiate his status in relation to England, and at last got the recognition he sought as the rightful native ruler over Wales. As Aronstein (1994) notes, once the leaders of other Welsh kingdoms had been submitted to an overlord, they would sooner turn to Gwynedd to rule over them rather than to England; the critic describes that, in 1250, the rulers of Wales withdrew their allegiance from England and turned to Gwynedd, thus cementing the policies which Llewelyn ap Iorwerth sought to achieve. Moreover, although some of Llewelyn's policies consisted of incorporating foreign customs into Wales and sometimes forfeiting native tradition, it was crucial to the later developments that these changes originated from a Welsh leader; when driven by internal influence rather than through alien invasion and oppression, these adaptations were not perceived as traumatic – something which drastically changed when King Edward I of England invaded Wales during the reign of Llewelyn ap Gruffydd (FEAR, 2016). Returning to Aronstein's (1994) analysis of *Y Mabinogi*, it is interesting to note that marriage alliances were crucial to establish the position of the princes of Gwynedd. The critic claims,

[...] marriage functions as a metaphor for political alliance that presents not only an argument for centralized government but also a vindication of the means by which Llewelyn sought to attain that government. Furthermore, the romances validate this vindication by locating it in an ideal past, arguing that the policies of Gwynedd will actually return the nation to the "old" Wales, and thus obscuring the fact that what these policies propose is a "new" Wales that adopts Norman customs in the interest of a continuing Welsh identity. (ARONSTEIN, 1994, p. 217)

Finally, the layered nature of this *mabinogi* should be reinforced: along with the other branches, this tale converges folkloric material with Welsh, French, and Latin literary traditions. The action in the Third Branch takes place in Dyfed – specifically, in Arberth –, which had previously been the stage to Pwyll's supernatural encounter; thus, it is well established within *Y Mabinogi* that this physical location stands as a liminal space, where characters may cross unseen boundaries into the unknown at any moment. Thus, the narrative displays interesting connections to the borderlands of the Welsh marches. The southern regions of Wales are often the stage to supernatural encounters, and the Third Branch seems to comment on the danger that can be found outside the boundaries of a kingdom led by one sole leader. This is, as Aronstein explains, a culture “struggling towards a new definition of itself” (1994, p. 220) – which, in a practical sense, needed to compromise and accept the coexistence with the Normans.

Moreover, the Third Branch reinforces the idea of south Wales as a hybrid space, permeable and susceptible to invasion. It is emphasized that Dyfed is also vulnerable due to the passiveness of its leader and unsolved grievances of the past – which could be a register of dissatisfaction with the overall actions of leaders or an expression of idealistic values towards the duties of authorities. The narrative seems to process these cultural changes, while calling for the centralization under one leader; it portrays an ideal past Wales, and the dangers which encroach upon the land when unity is not achieved.

Thus, it can be observed that both the First and Third Branches concern themselves with the definition of geographical and cultural boundaries. The tales appear to be a form of representation to the cultural and political environment of south-west Wales; consequently, these *mabinogion* can hardly be defined as the expression of the will of one single ruler. Rather, such complex composition demonstrates how these texts are a form of representation, processing and capturing the prevalent cultural anxieties of their own time. Most importantly, perhaps, the First and Third Branches express the impossibility of separating two cultures which coexist in the borderlands, possibly mirroring the configuration of the Welsh Marches during the Middle Ages. The next chapter shall focus on the Second and Fourth Branches, exploring how they can be a form of representation to the social landscape in northern and eastern Wales.

3 SECOND AND FOURTH BRANCHES: TRANSITIONAL SPACES AND AMBIGUOUS BODIES

In this chapter I will discuss the two remaining branches of *Y Mabinogi*. These, too, share similar themes: both tales deal with complex identities and ambiguous borders, while the characters face geographical displacement and forceful physical alterations. In “Branwen Daughter of Llŷr”, a young woman is caught in the conflict between two warring kingdoms. With her loyalties split, Branwen expresses a sense of isolation in face of her impossible position of not belonging in either Ireland or Wales. The final tale, “Math, Son of Mathowyn” features several instances of shape-shifting as a form of punishment; this branch deals with the subjects of authority and law in a political sphere, and it touches on some philosophical matters concerning the connection between the essence of beings in relation to their physical bodies. When recalling the critical literature concerned with *Y Mabinogi*, Patricia Ingham claims,

This scholarly genealogy implicitly positions the *Mabinogi* on a set of frontiers—some temporal, like the shift from oral tradition to manuscript culture, others territorial, as in the consideration of the texts’ “Celtic,” “European,” or English concerns. Borders, and the cultural losses and survivals produced at such places and during such times, are thus implicitly important to scholarship (INGHAM, 2001, p. 179)

In short, *Y Mabinogi* is understood to lie at the symbolical and material thresholds of medieval Wales: the point of convergence of Welsh and Latin literary traditions, oral and written literatures, the decentralized government system of Wales and the newly established feudalism, to name a few. Bohata (2004) describes frontiers and otherwise border-related imagery as a set of binaries characteristic of the convergence of two or more cultures; to the critic, Wales is permeated by unstable and extensive borderlands, and therefore, the literary production of that historical and cultural environment could be analysed through paradigms of hybridity. Throughout this section, the analysis focuses on the characters which hold precarious middle positions, and how the depiction of that ambiguity connects to the cultural changes which took place in medieval Wales. In these two branches, Annwfn is still present in the form of mysterious locations which characters seem to wander into and in the powers

of shape-shifting magicians. I will elaborate on how those topics are constructed within the literary text, demonstrating the attachment of such themes to the context of medieval Wales.

Within the Second and Fourth Branches in particular, it appears that the frontiers impinge upon the character's bodies. I believe that, to an extent, elements of a "fractured self, and the related image of the individual within whom (or space within which) a national or cultural divide is surmounted" (BOHATA, 2004, p. 154) are present in the tales selected for this chapter. Ultimately, these stories are a call for reconciliation and unity under the authority of one leader, reinforcing the overreaching themes within *Y Mabinogi*. Once again, the importance of unity is emphasized because of the turbulent relations both inside and outside Wales, with the inner conflicts among the Welsh regions and between the Welsh and Normans peoples, respectively.

3.1. "Branwen Daughter of Llŷr"

The Second Branch, which, like the others, first received its title in Lady Guest's translation, deals with the conflicts between Welsh and Irish rulers. At the center of these disputes, Branwen expresses the anguish of being torn between two lands. The first event this tale presents is the arrival of Matholwch, the King of Ireland, and his fleet onto the shores of King Bendigeidfran (Blessed Brân), son of Llŷr. His brothers stand by his side: Manawydan, who is also a son of Llŷr, and two brothers on his mother's side, Nysien and Efnysien¹¹. The first is declared to be able to "make peace between two armies when they were most enraged" (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 22), while the latter could cause conflict even between the closest siblings. Upon docking in Britain, Matholwch's emissaries declare that the Irish king wished to unite his family with Bendigeidfran's by marrying Branwen, daughter of Llŷr.

The alliance is settled between the two rulers, and Branwen is wed to Matholwch at Aberffraw – which was the chief court of the princes of Gwynedd (DAVIES, 2007). The

¹¹ The similarity between the two brothers' names is clear; the Welsh word "ef" by itself sometimes expresses masculine subject and object pronouns (he/him). However, as of yet, there seems to be no established semantic charge to the word "ef" when added to the name Nysien. One possible analysis of this affixing of a masculine pronoun to the name could be the association between masculinity and aggression, considering that Efnysien is the harbinger of violence throughout the narrative. The lack of further evidence to support this point, however, makes it hardly more than a speculation. Nevertheless, there is a parallel between these brothers' names that could point to their defining characteristics, which are polar opposites on the same axis: peace and war.

next morning, Efnysien discovers that the union had taken place without his knowledge or permission; thus, in an act of revenge, Efnysien mutilates Matholwch's horses. This character had been previously established as quarrelsome, and his act sparks the first conflict between the British and the Irish within the story – and further, this deed of revenge upon an allied king strains the blooming trust between those two peoples. Matholwch is deeply insulted by the maiming of his horses; Bendigeidfran, to prevent the Irish king from leaving in anger, grants him “a sound horse for each one that was maimed; and (...) a rod of silver as thick as his little finger and as tall as himself, and a plate of gold as broad as his face” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 25). This reparation was called an honor-price, a compensation that was paid for an insult. The treasure given to Matholwch resembles what was described in the Laws of Hywel Dda as the appropriate honor-price for the king of Aberffraw (S. DAVIES, 2007, p. 233) – thus, indicating that Matholwch was to be respected and treated as an equal to Bendigeidfran.

When the two leaders meet again to settle this compensation, however, the conversation between them is sad and lifeless, whereas before it had been cheerful. The British king, then, offers Matholwch a magic cauldron that held the power to bring a person back to life – which at last seems to please the offended party. With this matter settled, Branwen leaves with Matholwch; upon arriving in Ireland, she receives a great welcome and is cherished among the people. After the first year of her stay, however, dissatisfaction grows among the same people that once praised the Welsh queen. The Irish remember the insult Matholwch had received in Wales, and demand that their ruler take revenge on those who had caused it. They force Branwen out of her chambers, making her work for the court and strike her repeatedly. Next, the Irish demand that Matholwch set an embargo on Wales, so that none could come or go between the islands; this continues for three years. Branwen, ostracized by all, rears a small bird and teaches it to speak. She tells the bird of her misfortunes and sends it off with a letter to her brother.

Upon receiving the news about the hardship his sister had endured, the king gathers his armies and allies. Leaving behind seven men and their seven horsemen to watch over Britain, Bendigeidfran sails to Ireland and the ships are so numerous that their masts resemble a forest when seen from the shore; Bendigeidfran himself, with his gigantic stature, wades beside the ships, resembling a moving mountain. Matholwch's counselors advise him to retreat across a river too small for any vessel to sail on, and as the Irish pass, they burn the bridge over that body of water; it is not enough to stop Bendigeidfran, who simply lies

across the river to aid his forces in passing through – acting as a means of passage, materializing the Welsh proverb “Nothing, except that he who is a leader, let him be a bridge,” (S. DAVIES, 2007). At last, the Welsh and the Irish meet; Matholwch, declaring he never wished any harm upon his brother-in-law, gives the kingship of Ireland to Gwern, the son he and Branwen bore. Beyond that, Matholwch’s men build a house large enough for Bendigeidfran and his forces to reside in – as the king, having a huge stature, had never been able to fit inside a house. These terms of peace are accepted “on Branwen’s advice because she feared that the country would be laid waste” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 30).

When it comes to Bendigeidfran’s stature, it is interesting to note that while elsewhere in *Y Mabinogi* – both within the Second Branch and in the tale of “Culhwch and Olwen” – giants often display a monstrous aspect, none is attributed to Bendigeidfran. When the tale reviews the sequence of events which led the Welsh to be in possession of the Cauldron of Rebirth, two giants are mentioned: Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid and his wife, Cymidei Cymeinfoll. Both had come from Ireland after escaping an iron house made to imprison them – which was later set on fire to kill them. Matholwch acknowledges the story mentioned by Bendigeidfran and adds that the giants had first emerged with the Cauldron from a lake while he was hunting on a *gorsedd*, and Llasar was a “huge, monstrous man, [...] with an evil, ugly look about him” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 26). They approach the king of Ireland and tell him that within a month Cymidei would conceive a baby, and that the boy would be born within a month and a fortnight as a fully armed warrior. Matholwch takes them in, but in a year the Irish start to resent the giants because they would insult, harass and torment the noble people. After the giants refuse to leave, Matholwch has the iron house built, filling it with food and drink so Llasar, Cymidei and their family would feast. Once they became drunk and drowsy, the house is set on fire; Llasar, however, charges at the wall, breaking through it so they may escape. Only he and his wife survive; the two giants come to Wales where they are dispersed throughout the territory, and prosper, strengthening whatever place they happen to be in with finely crafted weapons (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007).

When analyzing this episode, Gruffydd (1958) claims that it is likely linked to the previous oral material, of which only fragments made it to the final version of the Second Branch. The event of the iron house could have been a part of an older tale describing the raid of *Preiddeu Annwnf*, or “The Spoils of Annwnf”. The folklorist notes the similarities between this section and the Irish tale *Mesca Ulad*, “The Drunkenness of Ulster”, in which

the king and queen of the Connacht imprison the King of Ulster and his army in a similar fashion. Gruffydd (1958) observes that Llasar and Cymidei clearly belong to a different people, not to the Irish; the first encounter between them and Matholwch takes place in a *gorsedd*, further cementing their connection to the supernatural and the Other. The fact that an iron house is used in the attempt to defeat them is also noted by Gruffydd (1958) as a connection to the Celtic folkloric fairies, as they are described to have an aversion to iron. Thus, the folklorist argues that the resulting episode registered in *Y Mabinogi* connected the Cauldron of Rebirth to the *Tylwyth Teg* – the Welsh fairy folk – as they were originally separate narratives. Considering *Y Mabinogi*'s previously established link between the supernatural and the hybrid cultures of frontier regions, it could be argued that these stories have been merged both to explain how Bendigeidfran was in possession of the Cauldron and to further the underlying themes of Annwfn and its people as the familiar Others.

Gruffydd describes the giants in this episode as “hideous monstrosities” (1958, p. 20). These creatures certainly appear to be mostly related to negative traits in Welsh tales, as Lisa LeBlanc (2017) describes in her study of “Culhwch and Olwen”: giants are creatures that are outside the boundaries of civilized society, and the immense proportions of their bodies imply an excess – gluttony, or lust – that threatens the established social order. While the giants that appear as foes in the Arthurian tales of *Y Mabinogi* are usually isolated, Llasar, Cymidei and Ysbadadden (the giant in “Culhwch”) have families; according to LeBlanc (2017), kinship ties were crucial to the organization of medieval Welsh society – often being much more relevant to group identity than a larger sense of “nation”.

LeBlanc (2017) argues that Ysbadadden ultimately severs these ties, as he is not married and despises social conventions which could grant him alliances, consequently failing as a leader. Nevertheless the fact that these giants have the ability to establish familial relations grant them a degree of humanity not commonly attributed to creatures of this nature; thus, they can be interpreted as intermediate creatures between the mindless, monstrous giants described in other tales, and the Kings portrayed as heroes – such as Arthur, whose figure often symbolizes the ultimate state of social order. Since the Second Branch shows the integration of these creatures which had been exiled from Ireland into Welsh communities, it appears that Llasar and Cymidei belong to a similar category. They are monsters in the sense that they are grotesque, non-human creatures – but what further cements them as monstrous is their hybrid, in-between place. The giants' position here strongly echoes Cohen's (2001) analysis of hybridity as a culture's revaluation of an identity

imposed upon them, by displacing and disrupting the external gaze and thus, finding a new definition of itself.

Returning to Bendigeidfran, he is not, like Ysbadadden, a giant who is also “a leader who has not established a proper place in his society by establishing kinship and marriage bonds” (LEBLANC, 2017, p. 34). Although no wife is mentioned, he does have a son to take his place in ruling Britain once he needs to engage in war; he holds the friendship of his siblings, and the loyalty of his people. These aspects lead to the interpretation of Bendigeidfran as a man of great stature, but not as a giant in the monstrous, hybrid sense, as he is fully integrated into the social order of kinship. Perhaps the mentions of Bendigeidfran’s height could be connected to earlier versions of his tale – maybe even an indication that he was once portrayed as a god. For narrative purposes, it is interesting to notice that Matholwch plans to lead Bendigeidfran into a house – which, although not made of iron, recalls the previous event in which the Irish king trapped the giants inside an immense house. The parallel between these sections of the tale is clear, and although the outcomes differ both are in some way disastrous.

A house large enough to accommodate Bendigeidfran is built as promised; however, inside that construction, a hundred bags were placed to hide armed warriors inside. Upon entering the house, Efnysien investigates the bags and immediately kills every single Irish warrior, one after the other. When he does, he sings an *englyn*: “There is in this bag a different kind of flour, Champions, warriors, attackers in battle, Against fighters, prepared for combat” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 31)¹². According to S. Davies (2007), the *englyn* is one of the oldest Welsh strict-metre forms; the specific form registered in the Second Branch is an early form, consisting of three lines. Later, that poetic structure would develop into four-lined *englynion* as the norm. The translator explains that this type of poem is written in “a complex system involving the repetition of consonants and internal rhyme” (S. DAVIES, 2007, p. 235) called *cynganedd*. The *englyn* Efnysien sings holds a pun with the word *blawd*, which meant ‘flour’ or ‘flower’, and flower imagery is often connected to heroes (ibid.). When the time for Gwern’s coronation comes, Efnysien bids his nephew to approach; as soon as the boy does so, he takes the child by the feet and hurls him into the fire. Chaos ensues, as Branwen tries, to no avail, to rescue her son and the warriors go for

¹² “Yssit yn y boly hwnn amryw ulawt/ Keimeit, kynniuyeit, diskvnneit yn trin,/Rac kydwyr cad barawt” (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 43)

their weapons. Only at this point, Efnysien begins to realize how dire the situation had become due to his actions,

When Efnysien saw the corpses, and no room anywhere for the men of the Island of the Mighty, he said to himself, ‘Oh God,’ he said, ‘woe is me that I am the cause of this mountain of the men of the Island of Mighty; and shame on me,’ he said, ‘unless I try to save them from this.’ (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 32)

Weighted by guilt, Efnysien sacrifices himself to destroy the Cauldron of Rebirth; he is thrown inside the cauldron and breaks it into four pieces, but his heart is also torn apart in the process. Without the magical cauldron, the British forces overcome the Irish – but still, it is not a victory, for Bendigeidfran is mortally wounded by a poisoned spear and only seven men survive: Pryderi, Manawydan, Glifiau son of Taran, Taliesin, Ynog, Gruddieu son of Muriel, and Heilyn son of Gwyn Hen. Before returning to Britain, Bendigeidfran orders that his men cut off his head and bury it in the Gwynfryn in London, facing France, so that his head would serve as a talisman of protection to keep the shore of Britain from invaders (S. DAVIES, 2007). When Branwen and the surviving men reach Wales, she is grief-stricken for the woe that her marriage had brought to both islands, and her sadness is so great that it leads to her death. Branwen is buried on the banks of the river Aber Alaw, being one of the Three People who Broke their Hearts from Sorrow.

The men then set out to Harlech; on the way, they discover that Caswallon son of Beli had turned against his Bendigeidfran’s son, who had been left behind to watch over the island, and killed his men. Caswallon hid under a magical cloak to become invisible, and Caradog son of Brân died from bewilderment at seeing the disembodied sword assassinate his companions. At this point, Caswallon is also portrayed as *gormes* for usurping the rulership of his kinsman – but no one opposes him. They finally reach Harlech, where they receive food and drink, and listen to the most delicate bird’s song they had ever heard: they stay at that peaceful place for seven years, feasting. Next, they head to Gwales in Penfro, one of the cantrefs of Dyfed, where they are “contented and lacking nothing. And of all the sorrow they had themselves seen and suffered, they remembered none of it nor of any grief in the world” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 33). Similarly to Rhiannon’s episode in the First Branch, the characters experience a distortion in time which likely indicates a supernatural effect connected to the liminal space of Annfwn, for they remain in that court for eight years without aging. The group is forced to move once one of them opens a door

which had been closed since their arrival; when looking through the door, “every loss they had ever suffered, and every kinsman and companion they had lost, and every ill that had befallen them was as clear as if they had encountered it in that very place; and most of all concerning their lord” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 34). The Second Branch comes to an end when Bendigeidfran’s head is buried in London, as one of the Three Fortunate Concealments.

The tale of Branwen is perhaps the grimmest in tone among the Four Branches, which as commented in the previous section, already display more somber atmospheres than the earlier, heroic versions of these stories. The alliance fails, bringing destruction rather than the prosperity to all parties involved. Branwen is struck and mistreated by a crime that was not hers, and her sufferings are registered in yet another triad, as the ending lines of the Second Branch describe it has narrated “the Blow to Branwen which was one of the Three Unfortunate Blows” (ibid). Moreover, when this tale comes to a close, it portrays a nostalgic scenery as they listen to the birds singing far off into the sea, and feast in a location where time is stilted, easing their grief. To aid in the analysis of depictions of loss in the Second Branch, I now turn to the study of Patricia Ingham (2001), which focuses on the passage of time and narrative interpretations of cultural change in the story of Branwen.

Ingham (2001, p. 178) claims “this is a story about Welsh survival despite disastrous loss and despite the failed alliance between two ‘Celtic’ cultures”. The quoted chapter begins with a critique of the perspectives often employed in the analysis of medieval Welsh literature – namely, in Matthew Arnold’s *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) and the trend set by his study. The methods described by Ingham (2001) tend to look at Welsh literature with a sense of romantic idealism which, while complimentary to the analyzed texts, ultimately ignores the political and cultural complexities that helped shape these works. The medievalist perspective, Ingham (2001) points out, frequently depicts Welsh literature as testaments to the lost glory of an archaic culture, or treasured ruins; moreover, many fields of “Celtic” studies look at *Y Mabinogi* as primitive texts, as opposed to the modern civilization brought by and through the English (at first, Norman) culture and language. What both of these methods fail to acknowledge is that loss is not merely the result of the natural passage of time: it originates from a specific set of geopolitical and historical actions, often including violent conflict.

In Ingham's analysis, the tale of Branwen explores the origins of Welsh loss. Through the depiction of time and loss in a chronologically fragmented narrative, this segment of *Y Mabinogi* "testifies (...) to the complex agency of an author on the border between a native, oral past and a colonized, textual future" (INGHAM, 2001, p. 178). Furthermore, the frontier position of the narrative itself echoes the role of Branwen as the one who must work at the middle ground of the delicate relations between two peoples, stating that the alliance between the Irish and the Welsh does not strengthen any of the kingdoms – and, in fact, ultimately brings death and conflict between these nations. When Matholwch first proposed the marriage alliance, he claims "he wishes to join together the Island of the Mighty and Ireland so that they might be stronger"¹³ (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 23); such mutual need for strengthening implies the existence of a common, external threat for both kingdoms, which Ingham (2001) identifies as the Anglo-Norman imperialistic policies. Nevertheless, the prevalence of internal conflict dooms all parties involved.

These conflicts converge in the figure of Branwen, who embodies the anxieties surrounding group loyalties; her border position is reinforced by her links to language and speech in the episode in which she sends her brother a message through a bird. She displays proficiency in both spoken and written language – the latter, symbolizing the world of political action. Her request for help – returning to the Welsh roots in a language that both she and her brother could understand, a shared cultural aspect among them – results in the military incursion over Ireland which ultimately destroys both of Branwen's worlds (INGHAM, 2001). Thus, going back to Wales became impossible to Branwen at the moment she was crowned an Irish queen; she had been changed, and there can be no perfect outcome once these two nations go to war against each other. In light of this inextricable scenario, it is possible to conclude that,

Branwen's position on a linguistic border has particular resonances for the cultural agency of the Welsh author/compiler. The tale's emphasis on the bilingual nature of Branwen's act (and the repetition of the starling's link to technologies both of speech and of texts) marks Branwen as a displaced figure of bardic power; in the rest of the tale, as we will see, Branwen's desolate end helps contain and control scribal anxieties about linguistic and textual change, anxieties that allude to the problems of colonial accommodation. (INGHAM, 2001, p. 181)

¹³ "ac os da genhyt ti, ef a uyn ymrwymaw ynys y Kedeirn ac Iwerdon y gyt, ual y bydynt gadamach." (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 30)

Although the expansive actions of Efnysien and Bendigeidfran may seem at first to be the main driving forces of the narrative, there are strong arguments for defining Branwen's impossible middle position as the central conflict. Ingham (2001) demonstrates that Branwen's ultimate fate is brought about by a bilingual act, pointing to the inadequacy she faces in between two cultures; moreover, the death of her son Gwern, who embodied the Irish-Welsh alliance, further cements the complications of holding ties to two warring peoples. The critic connects the struggle in the Second Branch to the anxieties surrounding cultural survival during a period of rapid change, spurred on by multiple sources: internal attempts to centralize Welsh government, Norman ambitions to disperse native rulers, and the translation of a long oral tradition into written form. These cultural changes are seen by Ingham (2001) as the source of the sense of loss expressed in the Second Branch, an argument which falls in line with Aronstein's analysis of the Welsh Romances as the depiction of an idealized Wales, now lost in the past.

In Ingham's (2001) perspective, Efnysien's aggression towards the Irish stems from an exacerbated feeling of political and cultural loyalty to the Welsh and further, demonstrates a fissure within Wales itself: diverging positions regarding diplomatic policies, as demonstrated by Efnysien's refusal to accept an alliance with the Irish king. It is he who most definitively severs the Welsh connection to the Irish by killing his nephew Gwern, and gives the Welsh an advantage in the war by killing the warriors who hid in the sacks of flour. The soldiers Efnysien murders later return, revived by the Cauldron of Rebirth – however, these undead forms do not have the ability to speak. Ingham (2001) considers that the loss of orality means Welsh superiority in the conflict – interestingly implying the lack of a common language results in the group being weakened. Regarding this depiction of cultural impairment, the critic pointedly concludes that “this loss comes not through an irresistible, disembodied passage of time but as the result of a particular, and particularly complicated, battle” (INGHAM, 2001, p. 183). Thus, the text appears to display an already developed connection between language and group identity, and further, the understanding that losing this cultural aspect can be the devastating consequence of violent action.

While the tale narrates Efnysien's displeasure with the Welsh alliance with another kingdom and tells of his subsequent deeds to dismantle the budding Welsh-Irish ties, the internal conflict of the Welsh is also portrayed within the Second Branch. This is achieved through the presence of Caswallon son of Beli; S. Davies (2007) links this character's name

to the historical figure of Cassivellaunos, a Belgic king who fought against the Roman Empire in 54 b.C. and who is mentioned in a few Welsh triads. However, in the Four Branches he appears as the one who forcibly takes Cadwallon's throne during Bendigeidfran's stay in Ireland; in the Third Branch, Pryderi travels to pay homage to him, demonstrating that Caswallon has established himself as a ruler within Britain. Gruffydd (1953) considers these aspects to characterize Caswallon as a *gormes*, a tyrannous invader who captured the Island; the folklorist describes that, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Brut y Brenhinedd*, Caswallon is portrayed as a British king in a kinder fashion; there is no question to his legitimacy, which aligns with Geoffrey of Monmouth's own ambitions of presenting the history of Britain to the Normans in a way that would validate the foreign invasion. Such statement regarding Geoffrey of Monmouth's intentions are supported by Alan Lupack, who claims: "the popularity of Geoffrey's work is due in part to its political usefulness, since it demonstrates precedents for rulers of Britain to claim authority in and allegiance from continental nations" (2007, p. 24). In the Second Branch, however, Caswallon is a treacherous usurper with ties to the then-ruling family who wiped out the other leaders of Britain with one stroke of magic – thus, the one who represents an "Other-world enemy to the protagonists" (GRUFFYDD, 1953, p.76).

Meanwhile, Branwen is ostracized in her new kingdom because of her Welsh origin; being a foreigner, she is left powerless as the people decide to punish her for the offences committed by her family – and still, she remains loyal to the Irish to a certain extent. Taking this aspect into consideration, Ingham (2001) notes that Branwen is narratively deemed as the final culprit for the doom of both peoples; as Bendigeidfran restrains Branwen from saving her son from the fire, it is implied that Gwern's death is ultimately safer for the Welsh, because his allegiances would forever be uncertain. In a configuration which Ingham (2001) interprets as essentially gendered, Bendigeidfran acts as the rational leader whose calculated thinking allows the ties to the Irish to be cut when there was no further possibility of salvaging the alliance, and whose severed head protects the land from improper annexation from the French after his death. Branwen, on the other hand, is overrun by her loyalty to her son, which compromises her duty to the Welsh. As a final remark, Ingham (2001) explains that the Second Branch warns against dealing naively in intercultural relations, for "within such a difficult position individual loyalties to the 'ideal' group are especially vulnerable and particularities of loyalty are especially to be feared" (INGHAM, 2001, p. 184).

I now turn to Gruffydd's (1958) analysis, which reinforces the idea of Branwen's rejection being connected to her position as an outsider; just as Rhiannon was a woman from Annfwn, Branwen was considered to belong to another world, and thus the guilt for the offenses of her kinsman was transferred onto her. In a previous version of the tale, she may have been suspected of not being a mortal at all. The nature of her punishment – working in the kitchens and being repeatedly struck with iron – indicates that she was being tested for being a fairy or some other kind of supernatural creature, because iron was believed to be able to banish *fae* folk (GRUFFYD, 1958). Although no such accusations against Branwen appear in the final version registered in the Second Branch, her position as a foreigner leaves her vulnerable to the distrust and hostility of the Irish people. The tragic episode in which Branwen's son is thrown into the fire may actually have been another test in a previous version; the two methods utilized to verify if a child was actually an evil spirit in disguise were to throw the child in water or hold them over a fire. If they did not swim or got burned by the fire, the child's humanity would be proven. Gruffydd (1958) considers that an earlier tale likely had Branwen holding her son over the fire herself, to prove that both she and the baby were humans. Rather than this more triumphant outcome in which Branwen successfully disproves her accusers, the Third Branch narrates Efnysien killing his own nephew in order to renew the conflict between the Irish and his own people – which is deemed ultimately as necessary, because the alliance could not be mended. It is, nevertheless, a grim end to the tale rather than the glorious victory of earlier stories.

In Gruffydd's (1958) folkloric reading, Efnysien's actions are chaotic; his retaliations for a perceived offense are disproportionately violent, and there is a mischievous tone to the way he harms Matholwch's horses that is characteristic of fairies and pixies in British and Irish folklore. Moreover, the final register of the tale of Branwen merges different traditions. In an earlier version, the fighting which decimates the soldiers of Britain takes place during a raid to Annfwn to capture the Cauldron of Rebirth, which was under Pwyll's care. The narrative contained in *Y Mabinogi* is not centered on heroic conquest, but on the dire consequences of personal offenses and unnecessary hostility towards possible allies. Once again, this theme seems to recall the background of political and cultural turmoil which was prevalent in Wales during the High Middle Ages. Branwen's tale, in the format of the Second Branch, implicitly condemns Efnysien for his exacerbated loyalty for birth-land and misguided aggression towards foreigners, which ultimately lead to the death of all but seven of his fellow countrymen. On the other hand, it also cautions against Branwen's

guilelessness in placing too much of her loyalty on a foreign people and thinking of her own individual attachments over the best interest of her people. When considering the final form of the tale of Branwen transcribed into manuscript, Gruffydd comments,

I can only conclude from these obscure references that the material which the author was using in *Branwen* had not been assimilated into the framework of the Four Branches as completely as the rest of the material, and that immediately before *Branwen* was reduced into writing, these named portions were independent oral tales. In other words, in *Branwen* it was the author himself or his immediate predecessor who brought together these different components rather than the early *cyvarwyddon*. (GRUFFYDD, 1953, p. 10)

Once again, as in previous branches, the author seems to have made deliberate choices concerning the foundational, oral material. Different portions and stories were selected, or meshed together, to create the meaning expressed across the Four Branches, which emphasizes the importance of unity, diplomacy and collaboration among the Welsh; at the same time, it betrays some anxieties regarding the effectiveness and endurance of alliances with the surrounding peoples. As Stephenson (2019) reports, marriage contracts could bring peace and mend relations, but they often brought problems; matrimonial bonds between *pura Wallia* and the March were often shaken by the cultural clash, as the economical aspects of marriage had developed into different directions in both parts of Wales. The noble women of the March expected to have the right to “dower lands which amounted to one-third of their husbands’ real property – which ran counter to the rules of older ‘classical’ Welsh law” (STEPHENSON, 2019, p. 75). Therefore, *Y Mabinogi* expresses a cultural anxiety regarding the social and linguistic changes of its time; the Four Branches consistently call for diplomatic relations within and outside Wales, but the neighboring peoples are often portrayed as necessary but unpredictable allies.

Interestingly, a few of the overarching themes in *Y Mabinogi* are approached from somewhat different perspectives in the First and Third Branches, which take place in Dyfed, and in the Second and Fourth Branches, centered around Gwynedd. It is clear that these points of divergence are related to Dyfed’s proximity to the Welsh Marches, while Gwynedd, the seat of the house of Abberfraw, to which both Llewelyn ap Iorwerth and Llewelyn ap Gruffydd belonged, was the center of *pura Wallia*. The tales located in the south-east of Wales have much closer relations to the Otherworld, sometimes merging with it; in the Second Branch, the characters encounter Annfwn and experience the time distortion

once they pass through Dyfed, which had been previously established as a liminal zone, the interstitial space between Wales and England, as they make their way to London. On the other hand, those tales which take place in northern and western areas display either a greater preoccupation with Ireland (which is the case with the Second Branch), or with their own Welsh neighbors (in the Fourth Branch).

Ingham (2001) comments that the ambivalence towards the Irish within the tale of Branwen echoes historical Welsh-Irish relations. At times, nobles of Wales had sought protection from the Norman incursions by fleeing through the Irish Sea – a statement which is also supported by Stephenson who claims: “in the eleventh and twelfth centuries Ireland provided a refuge for political exiles from Wales” (2019, p. 87). In the decades following 1167, however, the increasing Norman influence in Ireland made it difficult for Welsh rulers to look for sanctuary in the neighboring isle. In spite of the early alliances, the Welsh-Irish relations were rather unstable, and their interests were often at odds. For instance, the Norman enterprise to invade Ireland greatly improved the situation of Lord Rhys of Deheubarth, for the barons who had settled in south and east Wales were called to war across the sea.

Moreover, Henry II’s policies towards the lord of Deheubarth changed, as they moved from hostile to friendly, when Lord Rhys was established as royal representative in south Wales (STEPHENSON, 2019). At other times, Irish attacks were launched onto Wales; during the reign of Llewelyn ap Gruffyd, Ireland granted financial support to Edward I’s war efforts and castle-building endeavors in Welsh territory. Moreover, the ideal of united Celtic nations were hardly a reality during the Early and High Middle Ages, as Wales held a particularly vulnerable position due to its geopolitical locations (INGHAM, 2001). It is not surprising, then, that Welsh literature of the time would express the feeling that safety could only be achieved – if at all – within Welsh borders. When observing the physical locations mentioned within the Second Branch and how it is cemented on the geography of *pura Wallia*, the royal seat in Harlech stands out. Bendigeidfran is established in the early lines of the text as “king over this island, and invested with the crown of London” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 22); one of his courts is held in Harlech in Ardudwy, in the north-east of Wales. Harlech – or the alternative Harddlech – is a compound of *hardd* (high) and *llech* (rock); the rock where Bendigeidfran sat is called a *carreg* in the text¹⁴, while it was

¹⁴ “*Ac yn eistedd yd oedynt ar garrec Harddlech*” (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 29).

traditionally known as *Y Llech* (GRUFFYDD, 1953). To Gruffydd (1953), this could point to a possible lack of knowledge of the local legends on the author's part; however, the folklorist argues that Bendigeidfran was attached to that place by the writer of *Y Mabinogi*.

Taking Gruffydd's conclusions into consideration, the latter connection between this ruler and Harlech could have interesting implications. According to Davies (2007), Harlech is currently known as the site of a castle constructed by King Edward I in 1283. By the time the manuscript would have been written, that region was already acknowledged as a Norman seat of power – in fact, “accounts of castle and borough imply that Harlech was no place until Edward I's men made it a center of English administration in North Wales” (BREEZE, 1997, p. 303), and there seems to be no significant references to that place prior to the story of Branwen. According to Breeze (2012), the lack of mentions of Harlech in Welsh tradition and history suggests that it had not been a seat of government for native rulers, and thus the placement of Bendigeidfran's court there is considered to be a literary liberty. However, it is important to note that the royal site constructed at Harlech by the English king was actually a rebuild from Llewelyn ap Gruffydd's hall at Ystumgwern, five miles to the south, which Edward I had dismantled and moved to the new location (BREEZE, 2012). Thus, the landscape in which this story takes place is imbued with meaning. By attaching Bendigeidfran to Harlech, *Y Mabinogi* claims that place back to the Welsh, weaving the memory of the original Welsh castle to the place where it stands to this day as a Norman castle.

To conclude, the Second Branch of *Y Mabinogi* is a testament to the complex cultural relations of the time in which it was written. Once again, a folkloric investigation shows that the text within the Second Branch is a unique creation which draws from oral Welsh literature, and edits that material to convey the anxieties and needs connected to the political environment of Wales during the High Middle Ages. The unique position of Branwen, with ties to two warring cultures, is both tragic and thankless as none of her actions could achieve a perfect outcome: to support either side would mean that another part of her was betrayed. Overall, as the first tale set in Gwynedd, the Second Branch has underlying themes that diverge from those of the tales focused on Dyfed, the former being much more hesitant and wary towards alliances than the latter. Moreover, the mention of Bendigeidfran as the king of all Britain and his seat in Harlech – where the only significant castle was built by a Norman with the materials from a dismantled Welsh fortress – seem to reclaim certain titles and the sense of place for *pura Wallia* and for the princes of Gwynedd. The tale of Branwen

is unique in its concern with language and cultural loss, which grants this Branch of *Y Mabinogi* a distinct mournful atmosphere.

3.2. “Math, Son of Mathowny”

The Fourth Branch is perhaps one of the strangest among the other *mabinogion*. This tale is also set in Gwynedd, but rather than showing preoccupation with foreign kingdoms, here the conflict comes from the inside: disputes with the Welsh neighbors from the south and even among relatives. Within this narrative, the themes of punishment and reconciliation display remnants of the medieval Welsh legal system and reinforce the same message as the other branches: unification is crucial. Another relevant facet of this particular tale is the magical shape-shifting, in which a body may change, but that individual’s essence is only altered upon receiving a different name. As a whole, the Fourth Branch’s central point is “the violation of a status quo caused either by adultery, overlapping of the sacred and the profane, interference with nature and the otherworld” (BEDNARSKI, 2016, p. 239). In this section, I will explore how the narrative of Fourth Branch relates bodily integrity to power and authority, and how that plays into the overarching narrative regarding the importance of integration to the Welsh peoples.

The story sets off presenting Math, son of Mathonwy, who was the lord of Gwynedd. This leader could not live without resting his feet on the lap of a virgin, unless he was at war; Goewin was the woman to play the role of footholder¹⁵, and kept the ruler constant company. Math also kept by his side his two nephews, the sons of his sister Dôn, Gilfaethwy and Gwydion; they would accompany Math’s retinue to circuit the land – a practice in which a ruler and his officials would travel around the land and at various courts of his where he would be maintained by his subjects – on their lord’s behalf. At a certain point, Gilfaethwy becomes obsessed with Goewin, the maiden footholder. Upon realizing his brother’s desire, Gwydion proposes a plot to get the lord and Goewin apart by arranging a war with the kingdoms of Powys and Deheubarth, which were under Pryderi’s domain – along with the seven cantrefs of Dyfed, and the seven of Morgannwg, and the four of Ceredigion, and the three of Ystrad Tywi. The brothers go to Math, claiming to have heard of a unique creature dwelling in the South: it was called a *moch* – or pig, the sacred creature brought by Pwyll

¹⁵ The presence of a footholder – usually a male a court officer known as the king’s *troediog* – was common practice in the courts in Wales (SHEEHAN, 2009, p. 323).

from the kingdom of Annwnf. Math consents to his nephews' plan to go to Pryderi's court in Ceredigion disguised as poets and request for one of those creatures.

So the brothers are welcomed in Dyfed, and Gwydion fascinates his host with outstanding storytelling. Even though Pryderi is pleased, he held an agreement with his people that prevented him from parting with the swine. Gwydion then uses his magic to conjure up "twelve stallions, and twelve hounds, each one black with a white breast, and twelve collars with twelve leashes on them, and anyone who saw them would think they were of gold" (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 49), with saddles and bridles of the same material. However precious these creatures seemed to be, they were no more than illusions. Pryderi is presented with these gifts and, believing them to be real, accepts to trade one of his pigs. As they make their way back to Gwynedd with the creatures, the armies of Powys begin to gather, to retrieve what they had been cheated to give away. With a war brewing, Math leaves to join the fight; at this point, Gilfaethwy, with the help of his brother, approaches and assaults Goewin when the lord is away. Meanwhile, the leaders of Gwynedd and Powys exchange noble hostages in an attempt to make peace. Ultimately, the conflict is only settled when Pryderi and Gwydion – who had started the war – fight in single combat and "because of strength and valour, and magic and enchantment, Gwydion triumphed and Pryderi was killed" (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 51).

Once Math returns to his court and learns of what happened to Goewin, he offers her compensation by marrying her and giving her authority over his kingdom. He then punishes his nephews by turning them both into animals with his magical rod, one male and one female, so they would produce offspring by each other, declaring that they would "take on the nature of the wild animals" (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 52-53) whose shape they assume. The brothers undergo this process three times before they are allowed to come back to court: first, Gilfaethwy and Gwydion spend a year as a hind and a stag, respectively. When that time is up, they return to court and bring their offspring, a fawn, which Math turns into a boy and names Hyddwn. Then, the brothers are transformed into a wild boar and a wild sow for the same amount of time; the young boar which they bear is also welcomed, in his human form, at court under the name Hychddwn. At last, in the last year of their punishment, the brothers assume the shape of a wolf and a she-wolf; when that year comes to a close, they return with a cub that is named Bleiddwn as a human boy. This concludes the punishment, as Math considers they have been shamed enough – and so Gilfaethwy and Gwydion are bathed and properly dressed.

Sarah Sheehan (2009) makes several relevant comments in regards to the remnants of Welsh law present in this first section of “Math”; more than serving as a register of medieval legal history, the narrative’s depiction of punishment and authority may aid in understanding the collective image of Wales that *Y Mabinogi* portrays. Firstly, Sheehan (2009) points out Math’s strange position in which he cannot live without resting his feet on the lap of a virgin woman, unless he was at war. This, as the critic demonstrates, could be interpreted in two different ways as the Middle Welsh text is ambiguous. Math’s feet are described as being placed *ymlyc croth morwyn*. While *croth* is often translated as “lap”, the word is more strongly associated with “womb” or “belly” making the literal meaning of the passage closer to “in the fold of the womb of a virgin” (SHEEHAN, 2009, p. 322)¹⁶; moreover, that lexical choice seems more deliberate when considering that another, less ambiguous, word for “lap” (*arfet*) is utilized in other points during the tale. Sheehan (2009) also demonstrates the added meaning of *yn+plyc*, “which can mean either ‘in a fold or curve’ or simply ‘within’” (ibid). Then, as Sheehan (2009) concludes, such configuration with Math sitting with his feet inside a virgin’s womb implies that the integrity and physical strength of the ruler are linked to its ability to penetrate another. That could be an attempt to emphasize the impermeability of the male ruler’s body, as an embodiment of the law.

Beyond the mysterious position of his feet, Math also holds a *hutlath*¹⁷, the magical wand which he uses to punish his nephews, as a symbol of his sovereignty. The *hutlath* is the instrument through which Math executes justice and, later on in the narrative, tests the honesty of others; this object grants him power to alter the physicality of people and allows Math’s commands to overpower another’s will, being the ultimate expression of regal authority. According to Sheehan (2009) the *hutlath* carries phallic imagery, holding control over both punishment and restoration. When discussing the repercussions of Gilfaethwy and Gwydion’s violent crime, the critic argues,

It is significant that responsibility for this punishment lies with the very embodiment of the law: Math, judge and lord of Gwynedd, instigates the sequence of transformations, demanding a destabilization of human sex and gender to shame the brothers and so dispense justice and restore order. (SHEEHAN, 2009, p. 333)

¹⁶ Similar confusion can be observed in Latin Cristian writings; it is worth speculating whether the ambiguous term can be a sign of the work of religious scribes.

¹⁷ According to Sheehan (2009, p. 324) “a compound of *hut* (magic) + *llath* (rod, wand, spear, etc.; i.e., shaft)”.

The need to restore order is, in fact, an important concept in this passage as it reveals the exact nature of the offense committed by the brothers. Returning to the sentence that establishes that Math could not live without keeping his feet on the lap – or in the womb – of a virgin woman, one may note that there is yet another ambiguity to this arrangement. Sheehan (2009) points out that *ny bydei uyw* (he could not be alive) can denote both a condition for Math's survival, thus meaning that he would die unless he kept to that position, or simply a preference, implying that he refused to live without his footholder. These paths of interpretation may lead to different conclusions about Math as ruler. If the second reading is favoured, Math may be perceived as a slothful ruler who delegates his duties to others – such as performing the circuit of the land; the first reading, however, reinforces the idea that Math is the embodiment of the law, the invulnerable and impenetrable authority (SHEEHAN, 2009). Thus, in harming Goewin, Gilfaethwy and Gwydion make an attempt on order itself through the figure of the king; their offense is a direct threat to their ruler.

When Goewin exposes her rapists to the court, the shame she felt is emphasized – and consequently, Math's shame; the punishment imposed is, in turn, meant to shame the offenders as compensation for their breach in loyalty to the monarch. Notwithstanding, the animal forms they assume seem dissociated from their human existences. The brothers are never referred to by their own names while transformed, which demonstrates that the punishment “does not presume a perduring, gendered identity during metamorphosis but one that instead keeps distinct original and transformed bodies and identities” (SHEEHAN, 2009, p. 331-332). Sheehan (2009) argues that the absence of the brothers' names during the punishment indicates that they are not in their own flesh, and thus have lost their identities; the critic describes that, because of this refusal to name the brothers, their human essence is unchanged: they were not Gilfaethwy and Gwydion when they procreated. Because of this, the text is untroubled by the acts that, to the reader's perspective, constitute same-sex incest.

The act of bearing offspring by one another while in animal shape is supposed to be the source of their shame, as Math declares by the end of the third year. Sioned Davies remarks, the three boys receive names “consisting of the elements *blaidd* (‘wolf’), *hydd* (‘stag’), and *hwch* (‘swine’), and thus they are a reminder of the brothers' lives as animals (2007, p. 242). Nevertheless, these children are portrayed in an indisputably positive way, as they are described with attributes such as “strong”, “goodly” and “lovely” (SHEEHAN, 2009). They are also called “champions” in Math's *englyn*: “The three sons of wicked Gilfaethwy/Three true champions/ Bleiddwn, Hyddwn, Hychddwn Hir” (*THE*

MABINOGION, 2007, p. 54)¹⁸. The existence of these children is not deemed something shameful, but their names still bear the memory of how they were conceived; in Sheehan's (2009) understanding, that reinforces Math's sentence to the brothers as both punitive and restorative. Indeed, order seems to be fully reinstated when the brothers' punishment is completed as they are reintegrated into court, washed, and dressed according to their station. Math proceeds to ask for their advice on who should the new royal footholder be, indicating that they had been thoroughly forgiven after a satisfactory sentence, and were once again fit to give counsel to the king.

Considering the analysis developed by Sheehan (2009), I would propose that the punishment imposed upon the brothers holds another layer, which is the loss of agency. The critic suggests that the animal shapes of Gilfaethwy and Gwydion are conceptual hybrids, because they are dissociated from the men's human identities but also hold on to some semblance of their previous selves, as they know to return to court at the end of each year. Rather than knowing, they could have been compelled to come back at that exact time – as it is later implied in the text that Math may do that through the *hutlath*: as he commands, one must do. Furthermore, Math's sentence states that the brothers would follow the instinct of animals, bearing offspring during the natural season of those creatures; as their crime was an attempt on the king's authority and integrity – and thus, a subversion of the political order – the fitting punishment is for them to act according to nature and be compelled to follow an order that overpowers them.

As discussed in previous sections, the establishment of a common legal system was crucial in Llewelyn ap Iorwerth's project of unifying Wales. The first half of the Fourth Branch presents the conflict between Math and his nephews, who commit great offense against their leader's bodily integrity and therefore undermine his authority; in order to draw Math away from Goewin, the brothers first infiltrate Pryderi's kingdom to steal his sacred property, and then commit violent sexual assault against Goewin – harming Math in extension. S. Davies reinforces this point, stating that Math is dishonored by his nephews' actions, but “once their punishment is complete Math forgives them in the spirit of reconciliation” (2007, p. XXIV). After the due sentence and when order has been properly reinstated, then, both Gilfaethwy and Gwydion are reintegrated into the court. This event

¹⁸ “*Tri meib Giluaethwy enwir,/Tri chenryssedat kywir,/Bleidwn, Hydwn, Hychdwn Hir*” (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 76).

further drives the overall theme of union, while also reinforcing as inviolable the place of the monarch within this political structure.

Considering the importance that written law tracts had to the formation of Welsh identity, it is not surprising that the Fourth Branch has such a strong focus on the figure of the leader, his instruments of power, and the order he keeps. Math, as the king of Gwynedd, is perhaps the harshest among the rulers portrayed in the Four Branches, and he proves to be able to assert justice and forgive nevertheless. When discussing the role of Llewelyn I's legal system to the constitution of Welsh cultural identity, Aronstein notes that,

In an attempt both to avert the final "normanization" of Wales and to consolidate their own power, Llewelyn and his successors sought to forge an "institutional and ideological Wales" based on a national identity able to assert itself in the face of the Norman invaders and their increasing power in Wales and the March. This national identity, the House of Aberffraw argued, must first and foremost be an institutional identity: that of a unified Wales, with a strong central ruler in control of military and judicial power. (ARONSTEIN, 1994, p. 218)

As Math now needs to find another maiden to hold his feet, he asks Gilfaethwy and Gwydion for advice on who he should seek. Gwydion suggests his sister, Arianrhod daughter of Dôn, for the sovereign's consideration. The woman is brought to court and Math, again with the *hutlath*, tests her claim by commanding her to pass over his bent wand. When Arianrhod takes a step over the rod, she instantly gives birth to a full-term infant, which would indicate she was not a virgin; as she runs out of the room, she drops another baby, this time not fully formed. This instance, as briefly mentioned above, demonstrates Math's power to compel others. In Sheehan's (2009) analysis, the narrator uses the word *camu* to describe Math's rod bending, while the imperative used by Math to command Arianrhod is *camha*¹⁹ (form *cam*, meaning "step"). This lexical juxtaposition can be interpreted as a connection between the two actions: as "he bends, she must step" (SHEEHAN, 2009, p. 325) – once again affirming the ruler's absolute power and authority.

As Arianrhod leaves court, humiliated, Gwydion takes the second baby – an embryo – and wraps it in silk, hiding it in a chest. One day, Gwydion hears a cry coming from the chest, which he opens to find an infant. He cares for the boy for the first four years; then, Gwydion walks to Caer Aranrhod, where his sister resided, closely followed by the boy.

¹⁹ The sequence Sheehan refers to in this section is "*Yna y kymmerth ynteu yr hutlath a'y chamu. 'Camha di dros honn, heb ef'*" (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 77).

Upon seeing him, Arianrhod – who could not stand the shame of bearing that child – rejects the boy and curses him never to have a name, weapons, or a wife. Gwydion, by trickery and shape-shifting, grants his nephew all of those. Disguised as travelling shoemakers, Gwydion and his nephew approach Arianrhod’s fortress with products made with the finest leather. She comes to them, requesting a shoe that would fit her and, impressed with his skills, Arianrhod calls him Llew Llaw Gyffes: the fair-haired one with the skilful hand. Next, they assume the disguise of poets from Morgannwng²⁰ and are welcomed into Arianrhod’s halls for the night. Gwydion plays the role well, as he was a good storyteller²¹. Before dawn, Gwydion uses magic and illusions to roam the land evoking the sounds of trumpets so Arianrhod thought the land was about to be attacked; she enlists the help of the two poets in the fight, and so grants Llew weapons and armor. At this point, Arianrhod declares: “‘I will swear a destiny on him,’ she said, ‘that he will never have a wife from the race that is on this earth at present’” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 58).

By then, Llew was a grown man. Gwydion goes to Math and reports how they had cheated Arianrhod’s curse, and requests the ruler’s aid in overcoming the third impediment. Both men join their magic to shape a woman out of “the flowers of the oak, and the flowers of the broom, and the flowers of the meadowsweet” (*ibid.*) so she could be Llew’s wife. She is called Bloddeuedd, meaning “flowers”, to recall her creation. S. Davies (2007) remarks that the specific flowers used to create Blodeuedd appear elsewhere in *Y Mabinogi*; the yellow bloom is often used to describe a maiden’s blond hair. The flowers of the oak and the meadowsweet are both white, which symbolized ideal female beauty and purity. After their marriage, Llew is given the cantref of Dinoding in Gwynedd to serve as his realm; this cantref was located on the north-western part of Wales; the text then declares that Dinoding “is now called Eifionydd and Arduwy” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 59), referencing how the cantref of Dinoding was divided in two regions during the 10th century. This reference to a previous geopolitical organization locates *Y Mabinogi* in the past of its writers, which supports the argument for this literary text being a means of representation: the creation of an imagined past which should serve as a model to the ideal future of Wales.

After this is established, Llew goes away to visit Math Caer Dathyl. During that time Bloddeuedd meets a lord named Gronw and they soon become lovers; together, they

²⁰ “*beird o Uorgannwc*” (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 81).

²¹ Here, rather than “*beird*” the word used is “*kyuarwyd*” (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 82), another possible spelling for “*cyfarwydd*”, thus connecting Gwydion to that specific poetic tradition and emphasizing his skill as an entertainer.

plot to murder Llew. Bloddeuedd gets her husband to reveal the circumstances under which he might be killed: he must be struck with a spear crafted over the course of one year; he cannot be killed indoors or outdoors, not on horseback or on foot. The only way to assure his demise would be to make him bath on a riverbank with an arched roof above the tub; a billy-goat must stand beside the tub, and Llew must have one foot on the back of the goat, while the other would be on the edge of the tub. These specific conditions circumvent the restrictions which protected Llew, and as pointed out by S. Davies (2007) such unique vulnerabilities are characteristic of heroes in mythology and folktale. With this knowledge, Gronw constructed the spear accordingly, and together the lovers set up a location for the murder to occur. Once Llew gets into the bath and in the described position, Gronw strikes him with the poisoned weapon.

Llew takes up into the air in the shape of an eagle, and wounded, disappears. This metamorphosis may be attributed to the spear piercing Llew's flesh; the sequence of events further supports Sheehan's (2009) argument regarding the representation of authority within the Four Branch as defined by the impenetrability of the leader's body. Moreover, this event mirrors the moment in which Llew first received his name: as the boy aimed [*uwrw*] and hit [*uedru*] the shoe with great skill, Arianrhod utter the words which became his name²². During the assassination attempt, similarly Gronw aims [*uwrw*] and strikes [*uedru*] Llew's side²³ (SHEEHAN, 2009). The use of identical verbs connects these acts to Llew's identity, as he becomes undone by the same means through which he was first named – and, as Sheehan's (2009) arguments evidence, names and physical shape are entwined within the narrative of the Fourth Branch, making it so that those who lose their names also lose themselves. Following Llew's escape, “the next day Gronw got up and took possession of Ardudwy. Having taken possession of the land, he ruled it so that Ardudwy and Penllyn were in his control” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 61). Meanwhile, Math and Gwydion search for their kinsman. Gwydion is eventually lead to a swine farm, and he follows a sow to a tree in a valley called Nantlleu; at the top of the tree was an eagle, worms and rotten flesh dropping from an open wound.

Gwydion then sings three *englynion* in sequence, inviting Llew to approach with each one. The first calls: “An oak grows between two lakes/Very dark is the sky and the

²² “*Sef a wnaeth y mab, y uwrw a'y uedru y rwg I giewyn y esgeir a'r ascwm*” (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 80)

²³ “*ac a'r guenwynwayw y uwrw, a'y uedru yn y ystlys*” WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 88)

valley/Unless I am mistaken This is because of Llew's Flowers"²⁴ (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 62), to which Llew descends to the middle of the tree. Sioned Davies (2007) demonstrates that this first *englyn* references Blodeuedd, as it mentions Llew's flowers and shows Gwydion's realization of what had occurred. The second *englyn* implies that the tree where Llew stood held some supernatural properties for its endurance. The verses go: "An oak grows on a high plain/Rain does not wet it, heat no longer melts it/It sustained one who possesses nine-score attributes/In its top is Llew Llaw Gyffes"²⁵ (*ibid.*) – and upon hearing them, the eagle touches the ground. The final stanza calls for Llew to come close to Gwydion to finally regain his form, as the magician recites: "An oak grows on a slope/ The refuge of a handsome prince/Unless I am mistaken/Llew will come to my lap"²⁶ (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 63). With each new line, Llew's identity is progressively brought back; Gwydion first mentions his name partially, then fully, and at last adds his title of "prince" – thus making Llew's name the key to reverse his transformation (SHEEHAN, 2009). Looking at the aforementioned episode in the broader context of the Fourth Branch, it is possible to conclude that,

Llew's metamorphosis is consistent with those examined above, in that the narrator does not refer to Llew by name until he is again in his own, human body. Llew cannot regain his body until he regains his name: it is Gwydion's ritualized poetic naming of his nephew—together with a tap of the hutlath—that restores Llew to human form. Gronw's skillful striking of Llew causes Llew to lose both name and form by reversing the subject positions (active/passive, striker/struck) of the scenario whereby he gained his name. (SHEEHAN, 2009, p. 334)

As Llew is returned to his own shape, he goes to Math and asks for his help in getting compensation for the betrayal he had suffered. They march towards Ardudwy; Blodeuedd, having heard news of this, runs away with her maidens across the river Cynfael – but they look back as they cross, fall into the lake and all of them but Blodeuedd drown that day. Gwydion punishes her for adultery and treason by striking her with the *hutlath*, turning her permanently into an owl, and henceforth she is known as Bloddeuwedd. The name change, which goes from "flower" to "flower face" (recalling the resemblance of an owl) – is deemed a sentence worse than death. As Sheehan (2009) points out, this metamorphosis is

²⁴ "Dar a dyf y rwng deu lenn,/Gorduwrych awyr a glenn/ Ony dywedaf i eu/ O ulodeu Llew ban yw hynn" (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 89)

²⁵ "Dar a dyf yn ard uaes/Nis gwlych glaw, mwy tawd nawes/Ugein angerd a borthes/Yn y blaen, Llew Llaw Gyffes" (WILLIAMS, 1930, p. 90)

²⁶ "Dar a dyf dan anwaeret/Mirein modur ymywet/Ony dywedaf i [eu]/ Ef dydau Llew y'm arfet" (*ibid.*)

different from others in the Fourth Branch, because the transformation of her name implies that Bloddeuwedd has been irreparably altered, thus losing the identity she once held. Gwydion claims: “you will never dare show your face in daylight for fear of all the birds. And all the birds will be hostile towards you. And it shall be in their nature to strike you and molest you wherever they find you” (*THE MABINOGION*, 2007, p. 63), essentially sentencing Bloddeuwedd to be an exile among both humans and animals.

Indeed, when Aleksander Bednarski (2016) analyzes the figure of Bloddeuwedd, the focus lies on the ambiguity and liminality of the character; she remains at the threshold of the vegetal, human and animal realms, and her morals remain ambivalent throughout the narrative. Her ultimate fate is to have the shape of a nocturnal bird, which is often connected to the barrier between the mortal world and the afterlife (BEDNARSKI, 2016). There is something monstrous to Bloddeuwedd’s figure, as she embodies several contradicting characteristics – leading the critic to compare this character to Frankenstein’s creature. Her lack of identity, or rather, her overlapping of boundaries and fluid form, strongly speak of an anxiety regarding the need to outline cultural and geopolitical boundaries; again, the Fourth Branch is set in *pura Wallia*, which held a different set of relations to the neighboring territories – much more wary of annexation than the south, in *marcha Wallie*, where hybrid spaces were unavoidable.

Bednarski also remarks that Bloddeuwedd’s ultimate transgression is the “ violation of a status quo caused either by adultery, overlapping of the sacred and the profane, interference with nature and the otherworld or Blodeuwedd’s attempt to assert her autonomy” (2016, p. 239). Once more, shape shifting or losing control over one’s body is inflicted as a punishment for defying a lord’s authority. It is a similar, but certainly more severe, sentence as Gwydion and Gilfaethwy’s in the early section of the Fourth Branch. While the brothers shame Math and indirectly undermine his authority, Bloddeuwedd makes an attempt on the life of the future leader of Gwynedd – and her husband. These actions affect the foundational elements of the feudal system, which seems to be the reason why they result in a permanent punishment with no possibility of reconciliation. Bloddeuwedd’s final animal form restores the order she had conspired to violate, but does not offer her a chance of reintegration into society. Gronw is killed in a confrontation with Lleu; as he reestablishes his rule and ends those who threatened it, the tale comes to a close, with order having been fully restored to Gwynedd.

The Fourth Branch's preoccupation with the authority of Math and Llew is reminiscent of the Welsh policies of centralization which were established during the thirteenth century; the emphasis on the leader's power as the embodiment of law also recalls the philosophy of feudalism, which is completely centered on the male monarch. Aronstein (1994) makes a compelling argument about how the princes of Gwynedd attempted to assert their difference from the invading Normans through the definition of a native legal system – hoping that the laws would seep into the customs and tradition of people, so that they might accept change more willingly than if it was imposed by an outside force – and thus, by compromising in certain laws, Llewelyn I cleverly avoided war with the Norman kings.

In spite of the clear relevance of the male leader's role to the tale of Math, Sheehan (2009) makes a curious observation: the line of succession to the throne of Gwynedd in the Fourth Branch is matrilineal. Mathonwy, the designation of Math's name, is matronymic. Similarly, Gwydion, Gilfaethwy, and Arianrhod are all describes as children of Dôn – who has been correlated to a British goddess of the same name and to the Irish mother deity Danu (SHEEHAN, 2009). Moreover, Llew inherits the throne of Gwynedd through the lineage of his mother and grandmother: thus, in the tale of Math, property is not transferred from one woman to another but rather to a woman's male kin. These matrilineal relations are further emphasized by the strong kinship bonds between uncles and nephews in this tale; there is a clear contrast between “the traditionally patrilineal law of the father” and “the law as exercised by fathers in matrilineal societies” (SHEEHAN, 2009, p. 338).

In matrilineal societies, an uncle had duties towards his sister's children, to care and provide for them; sometimes it even fell to him to secure beneficial alliances for nephews and nieces. The Fourth Branch portrays these bonds in the relations of Math to Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, and then between Gwydion and Llew. While the sons of Dôn offend Math, they previously held a prestigious position in his court, which is restored after justice is asserted and order can be reinstated. Gwydion undoubtedly cares for Llew, first protecting him in a chest until he was brought to full term; then, by circumventing his mother's three curses, and finally, by healing Llew from a mortal blow and helping to punish those that had offended him. Furthermore, the Fourth Branch displays the maternal power, as Arianrhod is the only one who can grant or deny Llew his name; and, as Sheehan summarizes, “Names and naming hold considerable importance in the Fourth Branch. Names designate (or fail to designate) the identity of a body under metamorphosis; names identify parentage and kinship” (2009, p. 335).

This curious configuration, so divergent from the contents of the other Branches, leads Sheehan (2009) to conclude that the tale of Math can aid critics in developing new insights into the otherness of medieval Welsh literature. The critic's comment could further support the argument for the ambiguous bodies and metamorphosis within the tale of Math being a form of cultural processing of the ambiguity Wales itself was experiencing during this transitional period. To the present date, there have been no indications that Wales was ever a matrilineal society; nevertheless, it is interesting to inquire after what this tale could inform about the troubled times in which it was produced. A possible reading to explain the striking difference in the system of succession of the tale of Math when compared to the other Three Branches could be a literary exploration of alternative social organizations. If *Y Mabinogi* held the pretence to portray the past, this aspect of Math could be an attempt to justify current adjustments to the traditional Welsh way of succession.

At last, it is important to point out that the Fourth Branch portrays authority in the figure of Math, who is both punitive and restorative; there is an underlying discussion about bodies and identities, which are entwined with language. These characteristics could be read as marks of a culture's transitional point – that is, one struggling to find a definition of itself among different influences. It is significant that the worst punishment is reserved to Bloddeuwedd, consists of a permanent loss of name – and consequently, the loss of body and belonging.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

A fascinating and complex history unfolds as the layers of meaning of the Four Branches of *Y Mabinogi* begin to unravel. Welsh literature, unlike Irish and Scottish literatures, was not widely registered in text, which makes *Y Mabinogi* a rare register of the transitional culture of Wales throughout the High Middle Ages. Moreover, Wales had a unique set of relations to England in the medieval period that was also translated into the narrative of the Four Branches. As this thesis demonstrates, there is an argument to be made for these tales standing as a form of representation – in the sense that they process and reproduce relevant aspects of Welsh cultural identity. In facing severe intervention from Norman culture and political system, *Y Mabinogi* demonstrates how individual groups, who shared a language and an overall geographical proximity but did not constitute a single political unity, developed a common sense of identity in an attempt to differentiate themselves from the invading people. However, in order to assert themselves as independent from the Normans, the Welsh rulers made compromises resulting in an inevitable cultural blend between the two – in a configuration which could be described as a cultural hybrid.

As the present analysis has demonstrated, this hybrid identity is especially advanced within the tales that take place in Dyfed; the interactions with the southern and eastern regions – which clearly recall the political configuration of the Welsh marches – and the encroachment of the Otherworld onto the mortal realm of Pwyll can indicate how Welsh culture was processing the encounters and cultural exchanges with the Norman barons. *marchia Wallie* exists as a part of Wales that is both alien and familiar: Other, but recognizable and pervasive. As the tale essentially merges Pwyll and Arawn, there is the twofold implication that they were allies and ruled their kingdoms side by side, and that Dyfed and Annwfn were fully incorporated into one another. The two tales set in Dyfed emphasize the vulnerability of southeastern Wales, while also displaying the gradual assimilation of the unique Marcher culture which developed in the frontier space between Wales and England.

In *Y Mabinogi*, the Otherworld becomes increasingly more ingrained into Wales, to the point that supernatural occurrences – often a sign of intervention from Annwfn – cease to be heralded by resounding thunder, or the appearance of red and white animals. From

Gruffydd's (1953) conclusion that the stories of the lord of Dyfed and the King of Annwfn were once entirely separate tales, I argue that the deliberate choice to join both figures does more than merely solve a contradiction of the oral tales about Pryderi's paternity; by making both leaders the same man, *Y Mabinogi* represents the formation of Marcher culture, which conjoined Welsh and Norman aspects. The First Branch presents the lands east of Dyfed as ambiguous borderlands, portraying the inevitable gain of the other culture upon Welsh territory.

As the Four Branches' narrative reaches Manawydan's tale, the advancement of borders seems to have made great progress; Annwfn reaches Dyfed, and an outside force turns the once prosperous territories of south Wales into a desolate land, to the point that it drives away Manawydan and his companions completely. The humble labor they take up while wandering around the western borders of England makes them infamous; their skill fosters jealousy in the local workers and thus, every place where Manawydan tries to settle becomes hostile. He and his group cannot belong anywhere in England. Even upon returning to Wales, Manawydan, who was then leader of some of those lands, does not take practical action to regain his territory; only upon taking charge, keeping vigilance over the field, does Manawydan manage to break the curse that befell Dyfed and rescue his ally and his wife. The Third Branch's underlying message about leadership and friendship bonds reinforces the themes presented in the previous tales: as the boundaries become more ambiguous, it is of uttermost importance to tread carefully on relationships. Pwyll and Rhiannon had once offended a man, and another came to avenge him years later; although friendly connections are important to avoid a scenario such as Llwyd's curse, it is also not desirable for a leader passively to allow others to trespass on Welsh lands.

Moving on to the tales centered on Gwynedd, the overall themes of alliances and inner conflicts remain, but a few aspects seem to be more highlighted in these than in "Pwyll" and "Manawydan". The Second and Fourth Branches approach authority, language, and physical bodies as crucial points to the developing Welsh cultural identity. Authority is explored through the figures of Bendigeidfran, Math, and eventually Lleu Llaw Gyffes. These leaders, being the embodiment of the law, stand for the maintenance of social order. A severe fault committed against them results in punishment – within the Fourth Branch in particular, punishment in the form of forceful shape shifting – which aims at reinstating order in some way. Gwydion and Gilafethwy's sentence is meant to reintegrate them into the

court, while the retribution for Bloddeuwedd's offense forever marks her as a traitor. In that case, the status quo is restored through her exile.

No kinder is the fate of Branwen, who, because of her impossible position in between the Irish and the Welsh, ultimately witnesses the demise of her son and perishes soon after. Bendigeidfran is perhaps the strongest figure of authority among all the other tales; his calculated actions place the good of the Welsh people over personal loyalties, something that Branwen could not accomplish. His might as a ruler protects Britain even after his death and further, his chief court is placed on a location which overlaps Norman and British histories. Again, this seems to have been a deliberate choice on the author's part to reinforce Bendigeidfran's sovereignty, which also subtly reclaims the castle of Harlech to the Welsh. Once more, the analysis allows the conclusion that the Second and Fourth Branches uplift the qualities of a ruler and the order his figure represents; calling for unity under one leader, *Y Mabinogi* warns against disrupting the overlord's authority, while reminding about the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation among fellow people. I conclude that the two instances in which forgiveness cannot be achieved (Bloddeuwedd's final transformation and the murder of Branwen's son) involve either a foreign people or a sense of hybridity in the very nature of the offender.

The Second and Fourth Branches also display a compelling perspective on language. Branwen teaches her own language to a bird, resulting in the war between Wales and Ireland; to her, a full return to her native speech was not possible because of her in-between position, as a Welsh princess and an Irish queen. The link between language and belonging is also reinforced by the loss of speech suffered by the Irish soldiers; Efnysien's act of destruction gives the Welsh some advantage over their opponents, and most importantly, this loss is the direct result of violent actions. Therefore, *Y Mabinogi* distinctly emphasizes how the loss of certain cultural elements is a traumatic rupture, rather than the natural consequence of the passage of time. Furthermore, the tale of Math places great importance on names, as they essentially hold the identity of an individual. When characters are in a different shape – not in their own flesh – they can never be called by their own names because in that moment they are something else. This aspect is presented through Gwydion, Gilafethwy, Bloddeuwedd, and also in the tale of Pwyll, who is never referred to by name while he is in Arawn's place. These examples point towards an interesting understanding of language as a constitutive part of identity which was already present in this medieval work.

Finally, the portrayal of physical bodies is often related to either authority or identity. In the Fourth Branch, the bodies of Math and Lleu are impenetrable; because they are the embodiment of the law and social order, nothing can impinge upon their physical forms. Once Lleu loses his form upon being pierced by a spear – thus, losing himself. It is clear that this also results in him being deprived of authority, for Gronw usurps Lleu’s lands after inflicting harm upon his body. This attack parallels Lleu’s naming event, which further indicates the connection between names and bodies. Gwydion is gradually able to restore Lleu’s shape by calling his name, implying that his identity was returned. Similarly, Math’s physical safety is indirectly injured by his nephew’s assault on Goewin, which consequently threatens his authority. Meanwhile, the Second Branch tells of the monstrous bodies of giants; these creatures are demonstrated to be exiles or otherwise marginalized from society. The abnormal proportions of their bodies reveal anxieties surrounding ambiguous social belonging; the giants in the tale of Branwen are in-between humans and the mindless, animalistic giants of other tales (with the exception of Ysbadadden) in *Y Mabinogi*. More than merely enemies that must be defeated, these giants are narrative foils to the leaders that have been fully incorporated into society through their kinship and friendship ties.

At last, it is important to recall Bohata’s words, arguing that Welsh cultural resistance was established by outlining their differences from the Normans. This is exactly what Llywelyn ap Iorwerth sought to achieve – and Llywelyn ap Gruffydd continued – with the renewed redaction of the Laws of Hywel Dda; these were a way of registering Welsh customs, and one of the main instruments of marking the cultural aspects which separated the Welsh from the Normans. In truth, not all of these laws recorded Welsh tradition; rather, they constructed contemporary policies as tradition, so they could be gradually incorporated into society. They fabricated a past in which this new legal code was said to come from a now lost, gloriously unified Wales. Thus, these texts narrated a fictionalized past Wales to aid in the construction of the supposedly ideal future: all Welsh regions gathered under one of the princes of Gwynedd.

Y Mabinogi, which is widely accepted as the work of one author, displays a distinct intent with the construction of its narrative. Elements of oral materials have been selected, edited, and elaborated upon to create a group of tales with an overarching theme: the peoples of Wales need to reconcile and band together in order to preserve their memory, which encompasses social codes and customs, geography, language and literature. Inner conflicts – for instance, Efnysien’s rejection of the alliance Bendigeidfran had settled and Gwydion’s

theft of Pryderi's property – never bring good results; the focus lies instead on forgiveness, friendships and restoration of order after the due retribution is paid. On the other hand, alliances with other neighboring peoples are presented from different perspectives on the tales which are set in Dyfed and those that take place in Gwynedd.

In the First and Third Branches, the borders between realms are nearly indiscernible. Although an alliance may be nuanced and dubious, they are unavoidable in this region which has already developed a hybrid culture at the point of convergence of Welsh and Normans. The representation of alliances in “Pwyll” and “Manawydan” also reflect Gwynedd's diplomatic policies towards the Norman dynasty and portray the many marriage contracts established between native and newly-settled barons in *marchia Wallie*. Gwynedd, in the north-west of Wales, is shown to have much stronger boundaries; its alliances with Ireland are unstable from the start, being vehemently severed once they cease to be beneficial. In the tale of Math, Gwynedd and the southern cantrefs interact, but do not experience the ambiguous frontiers like those between Dyfed and the Welsh marches. These two perspectives on diplomatic relations create the portrayal of a native identity which was, ultimately, the Wales the House of Abberfraw intended to achieve: equal in its relations to the Normans, but otherwise independent from any foreign overlord.

In conclusion, the Four Branches of *Y Mabinogi* can be understood to play a similar role as the underlying narrative within the Laws of Hywel Dda; it draws from contemporary policies and social developments report on a fictional Welsh past. This long lost age of unity informs the ambitions of the princes of Gwynedd during the High and Late Middle Ages: centralizing the government of Wales, drawing from the feudal system but maintaining native independence. I understand that looking to the narrative of *Y Mabinogi*, it is possible to identify patterns of representation – that is, how the cultural and literary production of a people creates and perpetuates identity. Essentially, the Four Branches both portray and propel the development of Welsh culture, which affected and was affected by Norman culture. There was never a time when Wales did not share cultural elements with the surrounding peoples; however, *Y Mabinogi* contributes to the construction of Welsh identity, precisely because identities are mutually accepted narratives. Then, this literary text forwards the discourses of its time and plays a part in the solidification of Welsh culture during an age of transition and change.

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