

# Gwŷr y Gogledd? Some Icelandic Analogues to *Branwen Ferch Lŷr*

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As commentators have occasionally noted, *Branwen Ferch Lŷr*, the second of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, bears some curious resemblances to certain medieval Germanic narratives.<sup>1</sup> Here I shall consider those affinities, but also some Scandinavian analogues which have not yet been observed. Some of these may suggest direct contact between Welsh and Scandinavian literatures; but, whether or not we might consider them sources, I submit that viewing the Second Branch from the perspective of Icelandic saga narratives, and of saga style, provokes useful approaches to a literary understanding of the tale, particularly with regard to the character and the role of Efnisien.

The feature of *Branwen* which hitherto has attracted comparison with Germanic material is its narrative core: the story of a princess of one people marrying the king of another from over the sea. Her kinsmen, in time, pursue her, and a battle ensues. Allowing for the variation of abduction instead of marriage, this type of narrative is attested very widely in medieval Germanic literature (and its post-medieval reflexes), with most examples to be found in the extensive matrix of 'Hild' stories. Besides briefer attestations, we have the story of Hildeburh in *Beowulf*; that of Hilde in the Middle High German *Kudrun*, duplicated by the life of Hilde's daughter Kudrun; Snorri Sturluson's brief account of Hildir in the *Prose Edda* and the similar account in *Sörla þáttur*; and another telling again by Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum*.<sup>2</sup> The story-type is to be found without

<sup>1</sup>Alfred Nutt, 'Mabinogion Studies. I.—Branwen, the Daughter of Llyr', *Folk-Lore Record*, 5 (1882), 1–32; John Rhys, *Studies in the Arthurian Legend* (Oxford, 1891), pp. 265–67; Morfydd E. Owen, 'Shame and Reparation: Woman's Place in the Kin', in *The Welsh Law of Women: Studies presented to Daniel A. Binchy*, edited by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (Cardiff, 1980), pp. 40–68 (pp. 58–60); Andrew Welsh, 'Branwen, Beowulf, and the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale', *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 22 (1991), 1–13. Cf. nn. 15 and 18 below. <sup>2</sup>cf. Nutt, 'Mabinogion Studies'. A useful survey of Hild stories is provided by Kemp Malone, 'An Anglo-Latin Version of the Hjaðningavíg', *Speculum*, 39 (1964), 35–44. For a consideration

the Hild character in *Völsunga saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the latter of which is in its entirety an extended version of the narrative.<sup>3</sup> The similarity of these stories to *Branwen* is not, of course, very remarkable in itself. The narrative, put thus simply, is that of Helen of Troy, and is paralleled elsewhere in the Celtic-speaking world, as a minor story within *Culhwch ac Olwen* about Creiddylad ferch Ludd, and in the Old Irish *Aided Con Roí*, a story which, like *Branwen*, involves the capture of a magic cauldron.<sup>4</sup>

The Hild stories also offer more detailed resemblances to *Branwen*. Kudrun is forced by her abductor's mother to wash clothes in the sea, just as Branwen is forced by her husband's people and counsellors to knead dough; and where Branwen informs her kindred of her plight by sending a bird with a message, Kudrun is informed that her people are coming to save her by an angel in the form of a bird.<sup>5</sup> The versions of Snorri and *Sörla þátr* end with an everlasting battle between the two families to which Hildr became affiliated, perpetuated by their nightly resurrection, and this is reminiscent of the presence of the *peir dadeni* ('cauldron of rebirth') in the final battle in *Branwen*, though the closer Welsh parallel is the annual battle which must be held until Judgment Day between Gwyn and Gwythyr for the hand of Creiddylad ferch Ludd in *Culhwch*, and closer analogues yet have been adduced from Ireland.<sup>6</sup> These details, then, are suggestive, but not compelling.<sup>7</sup>

Less compelling again is Andrew Welsh's suggestion that both

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of the tale in its Scandinavian context, with references, see John Frankis, 'The Hild-Story (Hjaðningavíg) as a Saga-Motif', in *Fourth International Saga Conference: München, July 30th–August 4th, 1979* (Munich, 1979) (no page numbers). <sup>3</sup>*Völsunga saga*, §§ 3–5 (Nutt also cited the story of Guðrún later in the saga, but the similarity seems weak to me). References to sagas are, unless otherwise stated, to *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, edited by Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 3 vols (Reykjavík, 1943–44). These texts are also available at the Netútgáfan website at <http://www.snerpa.is/net/>. Those seeking translations of sagas will find references in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Phillip Pulsiano and others (London, 1993), s.nn. <sup>4</sup>*Culhwch and Olwen: An Edition and Study of the Oldest Arthurian Tale*, edited by Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans (Cardiff, 1992), pp. 35–36. For *Aided Con Roí*, see Proinsias Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr: A Study in the Irish Affinities and of the Composition of the Second Branch of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1958), p. 47. <sup>5</sup>*Kudrun*, edited by K. Bartsch, fifth edition, revised by K. Stackmann (Wiesbaden, 1980), §24, especially stanzas 1166–67. *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, edited by Ifor Williams, second edition (Cardiff, 1951), pp. 37–38. All references to the *Four Branches* are to this edition, collated, in the case of *Branwen*, with *Branwen Uerch Lyr: The Second of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, edited by Derick S. Thomson, *Mediaeval and Modern Welsh Series*, 2 (Dublin, 1986). All translations are my own, and not intended to have any literary merit. <sup>6</sup>Michael Chesnutt, 'An Unsolved Problem in Old Norse-Icelandic Literary History', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 1 (1968), 122–34 (pp. 129–33); Niels Lukman, 'An Irish Source and Some Icelandic *Fornaldarsögur*', *ibid.*, 10 (1977), 41–57. <sup>7</sup>cf. B. G. Charles, *Old Norse Relations with Wales* (Cardiff, 1934), pp. 78–81; Mac Cana, *Branwen*, pp. 166–69.

*Beowulf*'s Hildeburh episode and *Branwen* distinctively share the 'tragic peaceweaver' motif (though this is not to decry the value of the literary comparison he draws, nor his important observation that *Branwen*'s plot is more like that of the Hildeburh episode than that of the 'Calumniated Wife' tale, which is how it has traditionally been identified).<sup>8</sup> Several Hild-characters are portrayed, like *Branwen*, as working to bring about peace (sometimes successfully, as with Hilde and Kudrun, and sometimes not, as with Snorri's Hildr), whereas in *Beowulf* the 'tragic peaceweaver' motif is present only implicitly. The poem shows Hildeburh ordering her slain brother and son(s) to be put on the funeral pyre, and her removal by her family of birth, as though she were a chattel, when they kill her husband; but her tragic position is never made explicit, as it is in *Branwen*.<sup>9</sup> *Branwen*'s misdirected expression of guilt, 'guae ui o'm ganedigæth. Da a dwy ynys a diffeithwy't o'm achaws i' ('woe to me for my birth. Two good islands have been destroyed on my account'), and her breaking her heart, are instead motifs found in Old Irish literature, and are more reminiscent of King Hagen's words in *Kudrun*, 'durch ir willen wart der brünnen vil verhouwen' ('The mail-coats of many were hacked to pieces because of her desires'), and the narrator's 'ir reise mit den gæsten hæt die schœnen Hilden vil sære gerouwen' ('the beautiful Hilde had sorrowed very greatly for her journey with the guests/strangers'), than of the depiction in *Beowulf*.<sup>10</sup>

Welsh also suggested that Welsh women had to give their consent to marriage and might not, therefore, be used as political pawns, thus arguing that *Branwen* must be based on a Germanic story-type.<sup>11</sup> This claim, however, appears to be unfounded in relation to the period of the *Four Branches*: the medieval Welsh tractate on the Law of Women allows a woman's kin to dispose of her in marriage, and to reclaim her should she elope.<sup>12</sup> In the *Four Branches* the betrothal of Rhiannon to Gwawl, and in *Culhwch ac Olwen* Olwen's marriage to Culhwch, are entirely dependent on the wishes of the women's fathers.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to Welsh's claim, Pryderi clearly determines Rhiannon's re-marriage, negotiating it in her absence and subsequently declaring 'Arglywydes . . . mi a'th roessum yn wreic y Uanawydau ab Llŷr' ('Lady . . . I have given you as wife to Manawydan son of Llŷr').<sup>14</sup> That Rhiannon then gives her consent surely means that she does not intend to rebel, rather than that she has a right to decide.

<sup>8</sup>Welsh, 'Branwen', pp. 6–9. <sup>9</sup>*Beowulf*, lines 1063–1160, edited by F. Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, third edition (London, 1950). <sup>10</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 45. For the Irish connection, see Mac Cana, *Branwen*, pp. 99–100. *Kudrun*, stanzas 499 and 562.

<sup>11</sup>Welsh, 'Branwen', pp. 6–7. <sup>12</sup>Dafydd Jenkins, 'Property Interests in the Classical Welsh Law of Women', in *Welsh Law of Women*, edited by Jenkins and Owen, pp. 69–92 (p. 72). <sup>13</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, pp. 12 and 14; *Culhwch and Olwen*, passim.

<sup>14</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, pp. 49–50.

However, a different analogue, pointed out in 1903 by Axel Olrik, seems to show for certain that *Branwen* shares material with Old Icelandic literature.<sup>15</sup> This is the Icelandic *Hrólfs saga kraka*, a reflex of another extensively attested Germanic body of legend, with analogues in, amongst other works, *Beowulf*, *Widsith*, the *Gesta Danorum*, the works of Snorri Sturluson, and a lost *Skjöldunga saga*.<sup>16</sup> At the climax of the saga's plot, King Hrólfr and his champions ride to the court of Hrólfr's stepfather, Aðils, king of Sweden, and his mother, Yrsa (who is also Hrólfr's sister by her first, accidentally incestuous, marriage). In the terms of the story-type discussed above, this ride is analogous to the Welsh invasion of Ireland, although Hrólfr's intention here is to recover the patrimony (*föðurarfr*) of which Aðils has deprived him, rather than to rescue Yrsa.<sup>17</sup> Gwyn Jones, who as translator both of *Branwen* and of *Hrólfs saga* was undeniably well placed to judge, was unconvinced by Olrik's observation, and suggested that 'visits to or raids upon grotesque and terrible halls in other kingdoms are common enough to require no theory of influences and transfers'.<sup>18</sup> But this seems to me to be overly reductionist, especially given our increasing appreciation of Scandinavian cultural involvement in the region of the Irish Sea.<sup>19</sup>

Medieval Wales offers comparatively little evidence for the medieval period, either literary or archaeological, and Henry Loyn's Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in 1976—the conclusions of which may be taken to represent the historiographical context for Jones's thought—was more concerned to discover any evidence of Scandinavians at all than to argue for cultural interaction between them and the Welsh, finding Wales 'peripheral' to Scandinavians' interests.<sup>20</sup> More recently, however, Wendy Davies has argued that northern Wales was under Scandinavian rule in the tenth and eleventh centuries.<sup>21</sup> This is where the British scenes of *Branwen* are set; moreover, Brynley F. Roberts has plausibly argued for this region as

<sup>15</sup>A. Olrik, *Danmarks Heltedigtning: En Oldtidsstudie*, 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1903–10), I, 208; Volume I translated by Lee M. Hollander, *The Heroic Legends of Denmark*, Scandinavian Monographs, 4 (London, 1919), p. 360. <sup>16</sup>cf. Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings*, second edition (Oxford, 1984), pp. 45–49. <sup>17</sup>But it may be noted that Hrólfr's objective is reminiscent of the quest for the cauldron implied by the allusions of the poem *Preiddeu Annwn*, which bears several resemblances to *Branwen*, and secondarily present in *Aided Con Roi*. Cf. R. S. Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend* (Cardiff, 1956), pp. 148–59; Mac Cana, *Branwen*, pp. 46–49. <sup>18</sup>Gwyn Jones, *Kings, Beasts, and Heroes* (London, 1972), p. 45, n. 1. Cf. *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, selected and translated by Gwyn Jones (London, 1961), pp. 221–318; *The Mabinogion*, translated by Gwyn and Thomas Jones (London, 1949), pp. 25–40. <sup>19</sup>cf. the studies and approaches in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, edited by Howard B. Clarke and others (Dublin, 1998). <sup>20</sup>Henry Loyn, *The Vikings in Wales* (London, 1976), p. 21. <sup>21</sup>Wendy Davies, *Patterns of Power in Early Wales* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 48–60.

the place where the *Four Branches* were composed.<sup>22</sup> Unquestionably, stories of Scandinavian heroes circulated in Gwynedd: the *Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan* contains a brief account of Harald Harfagyr (Haraldr inn hárfagri) and his brothers. The striking similarity of this to Scandinavian accounts has recently been shown by Judith Jesch.<sup>23</sup> Hints that Scandinavian and Welsh legendary material were both available in the Welsh marches are provided particularly by the Middle English lyric *Annot and John*, whose last stanza compares the lady with heroes and heroines of Scandinavian and Welsh nomenclature, along with one Hilde, whose presence would seem to attest to the circulation of the Hild story in this area.<sup>24</sup> Thus we have plausible contexts for the sharing of story material between Scandinavian and Welsh cultures. Let us, therefore, consider *Hrólfs saga* and *Branwen*.

When Hrólfr arrives at Aðils's court, his retainer Böðvarr tells the stablemen that 'hvárki bregði lagi sínu toppr né tagl í hestunum, ok gætið þeira vel ok geymið hugalt, at eigi saurgist þeir' ('their coats should not have jerked, neither forelock nor tail, on the horses, and tend them well and watch them carefully, so that they should not get out of order').<sup>25</sup> Aðils, when he hears of this, declares:

Harla mikit er um ofstopa þeira ok dramb . . . Höggvið ór rófunar nær föllum við rass upp ok skerið ór toppana, svá at þar fylgi með ennileðrit, ok leikið þá út sem háðuligast í öllu þit getið, nema látið þá tóra at eins.<sup>26</sup>

This is the greatest of their arrogance and pride . . . hack off the tail-stumps where they meet with the rump and cut off the forelocks, so that

<sup>22</sup>Brynley F. Roberts, 'Where Were the Four Branches of the Mabinogi Written?', in *The Individual in Celtic Literatures*, edited by Joseph Falaky Nagy, CSANA Yearbook, 1 (Dublin, 2001), pp. 61–73. For the traditional Demetian ascription, see *Pedeir Keinc*, pp. xxxix–xli. Roberts's argument is consistent with the thrust of Andrew Breeze, 'Did a Woman Write *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*?', *Studi medievali*, 37 (1997), 679–705; cf. Andrew Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 74–79. While Breeze is convincing neither in his argument for a female author of the *Four Branches*, nor that that author was Gwenllïan, daughter of Gruffydd ap Cynan, he does establish interesting associations between her biography and the story of the *Four Branches*, which could imply her patronage or that of her family—let us not, as it were, throw out the bathwater with the baby. <sup>23</sup>*A Medieval Prince of Wales: The Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan*, edited and translated by D. Simon Evans (Felinfach, 1990), pp. 24–26. Judith Jesch, 'Norse Historical Traditions and *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan*: Magnús Berfœttr and Haraldr Hárfagri', in *Gruffudd ap Cynan: A Collaborative Biography*, edited by K. L. Maund (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 117–47 (especially pp. 139–47). <sup>24</sup>*English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century*, edited by Carleton Brown (Oxford, 1932), pp. 136–38 (text); 226–28 (relevant notes). For discussion of the Scandinavian connection, with references, see John Frankis, 'Lawman and the Scandinavian Connection', *Leeds Studies in English*, 31 (2000), 81–113 (pp. 84–85, especially n. 15). <sup>25</sup>§40. <sup>26</sup>§40.

the skin of the forehead comes off there, and play thenceforth the most mockingly in all your ability, except only that you allow them to live.

The similarity of this passage to Efnisien's behaviour when he learns that Matholwch has married Branwen is obvious. Efnisien's action occurs in an earlier stage in the narrative, but the episodes are comparable not just in general terms, but in the precise details of the mutilation:

Ac yn hynny guan y dan y meirych, a thorri y guefleu wrth y danned udunt, a'r clusteu wrth y penneu, a'r rawn wrth y keuyn; ac ny caei graf ar yr amranneu, eu llad wrth yr ascwrn. A gwneuthur anfyryf ar y meirych uelly, hyd nat oed rym a ellit a'r meirych.<sup>27</sup>

And on that, he pushed upwards at the horses, and cut their lips back to their teeth, and their ears down to their heads, and their (?tail-)hair down to their backs; and where he could get a grip on their eyelids, he cut them back to the bone. And he maimed the horses thus, until no use could be made of the horses.

Horse-mutilation involving cutting through the tail-flesh is attested elsewhere in the medieval world,<sup>28</sup> and other horse-mutilations appear in Welsh and Icelandic literature. As Mac Cana observed, in the Welsh *Vita Sancti Cadoci*, from the late eleventh century, the saint has thieves punished by having their horses' ears and lips cut off.<sup>29</sup> A slightly different mutilation appears in the Icelandic *Grettis saga* (where Grettir flays his father's horse alive).<sup>30</sup> But none is as similar to *Branwen*'s as *Hrólfs saga*'s—the fact that *Hrólfs saga*'s contributes motif S175 to the Aarne-Thompson motif-index should not be mistaken for an attestation of widespread occurrence.<sup>31</sup>

Events proceed from this episode in *Hrólfs saga kraka* in much the same sequence as in the invasion of Ireland in *Branwen Ferch Lŷr*. In *Branwen*, Bendigeidfran's army arrives in Ireland and peace is made, while Hrólfr, for his part, is ostensibly received graciously when he arrives at Aðils's hall. But, peace made, the Irish plot an ambush: they build a hall in which are hung two hundred leather bags, each containing a warrior who is to ambush the British upon their arrival. Efnisien, however, enters the hall ahead of his compatriots, enquires of an Irishman what is in the bags, and (disregarding

<sup>27</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 32. <sup>28</sup>Dafydd Jenkins, 'The Horse in the Welsh Law Texts', in *The Horse in Celtic Culture: Medieval Welsh Perspectives*, edited by Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones (Cardiff, 1997), pp. 73–76. <sup>29</sup>Mac Cana, *Branwen*, pp. 158–59.

<sup>30</sup>*Grettis saga*, §14, edited by Guðni Jónsson, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar, Bandamanna saga, Odds þáttur Ófeigssonar*, Íslenzk fornrit, 7 (Reykjavík, 1934), pp. 1–290.

<sup>31</sup>*Contra* Sioned Davies, 'Horses in the *Mabinogion*', in *Horse in Celtic Culture*, edited by Davies and Jones (Cardiff, 1997), pp. 121–40 (p. 136).

the Irishman's claim that they contain *blawt* 'flour') crushes the head of each Irishman while he is still in the bag. Meanwhile, in the saga, Svipdagr, one of Hrólfr's champions, leads the way into Aðils's hall, which contains 'marga ófæru' ('many obstacles'). Hrólfr and his men

sjá . . . ok, at tjöldin, sem í kringum höllina eru innan henni til prýðis, eru fram brotin ok muni þar menn vera undir með vápnum. Þetta var orði sannara, at þar þusti brynjaðr maðr undan hverju skauti, þá þeir höfðu komizt yfir grafirnar.<sup>32</sup>

see . . . also, that the hangings, which were hung around the inside of the hall as its adornment, had been folded forward and there would be men under there with weapons. And so it turned out, that an armoured man rushed from under every cloth, when they had got themselves over the pitfalls.

Here the heroes walk into the ambush and have to fight it out, but the narrative remains essentially the same as in *Branwen*: the ambush is overcome, and events proceed. AT K312 *Thieves hidden in oil casks. In one cask is oil; in the others robbers are hidden. The girl kills them* seems the closest comparison which Aarne and Thompson's motif-index offers for this episode, but the episode is surely an international type and as such could appear polygenetically in our sources.<sup>33</sup> But in its co-occurrence with the horse-mutilation, and in some more detailed similarities between Efnisien and Svipdagr which I shall consider below, it is significant as evidence for links between *Branwen* and *Hrólfs saga*.

*Branwen*'s next episode has the British and Irish sitting down at peace in the hall, but Efnisien causes strife once more by casting Gwern, the child of Branwen and Matholwch, into the fire. In *Hrólfs saga*, a truce is established, but Hrólfr's life is threatened again, this time by the lighting of an excessively hot fire before him. It may be significant that, due to an incestuous union, Hrólfr is not only the brother of Aðils's wife, Yrsa (thus, genealogically, he is equivalent to Bendigeidfran), but is also her son (thus genealogically equivalent to Gwern). He invades the land of his brother-in-law, as Bendigeidfran does, but also is threatened by fire, as Gwern is at the same stage of the narrative. Hrólfr and his champions endure the heat for a long time, and survive by finally leaping over the fire, and then

<sup>32</sup>§40. <sup>33</sup>Cf. Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff, 1961), pp. 101–2. Too late for consideration here, however, Ralph O'Connor points out to me that *Sigrarðs saga frækna*, §9, edited by Agnete Loth, *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, v, Editiones Arnarnæðar, series B, 24 (Copenhagen, 1965), pp. 39–107, has an account of the foiling of an ambush in a hall even more similar to *Branwen*'s than *Hrólfs saga*'s, showing that such a narrative was known in Iceland.

throwing in the stokers.<sup>34</sup> The comparison of *Branwen* with *Hrolfs saga* is less straightforward here than the two preceding examples, but remains significant, and is closer than to the other Scandinavian reflexes of Hrolfr's story, where no one is thrown into the fire.

At this point in *Branwen*, the final battle ensues, whereas events in *Hrolfs saga* continue to unfold: Aðils escapes, and later attacks Hrolfr and his men when they are in their sleeping quarters, first by sending a troll in the form of a boar, but secondly by trying to burn down the hall which Hrolfr is in. The troll episode raises some curious questions in relation to *Branwen*, which may be chimeric, but are worth noting. The troll is defeated by Hrolfr's champion, Boðvarr, with the assistance of Hrolfr's hound, Gramr. This detail calls to mind the shout of Morddwyd Tyllion as the final battle in *Branwen* commences: 'Guern gwn, gwchuiwch Uordwyd Tyllion' ('Dogs of Gwern, beware of Morddwyd Tyllion', by emendation from 'Guern gwngwch uiwch . . .').<sup>35</sup> This episode in *Branwen* is evidently complex and layered; not only are both manuscripts corrupt as they stand, perhaps suggesting a miscopying derived from scribal incomprehension, but *morddwyd tyllion* should mean 'pierced/thick thigh', and Bran is described with those words in a poem in the Book of Taliesin—it may, then, have been intended as an epithet for him.<sup>36</sup> Gramr, meanwhile, has its objective correlative in stanza 44 of the Eddaic poem *Grimnismál*, where 'Garmr' is given by Óðinn as the name of 'æztr . . . hunda' ('the best . . . of dogs'), and is portrayed in *Voluspá* stanza 49 as baying and breaking free at the Ragnarok.<sup>37</sup> These analogues offer the prospect, then, of a troll needing to beware of a dog called Garmr, and of a giant telling the dogs of Gwern to beware.

At any rate, the following episode in *Hrolfs saga*—the attempted burning-in—shows clear affinities to *Branwen*, although, as with the horse-mutilation, the episode has a different role in each text. Burning-in appears in *Branwen*'s in-tale, concerning Llassar Llaes Gyfnewid and the arrival of the *peir dadeni* in Britain, as the means by which the Irish get rid of Llassar and his family. In *Branwen* the hall is of iron and the foes of the Irish are plied with food and drink, neither feature being present in *Hrolfs saga*, but the means of escape is the same: 'ac yd arhoes ef yny uyd y pleit haearn yn wenn. Ac rac diruawr wres y kyrchwys y bleit a'e yscwyd a'y tharaw gantaw allan' ('and he waited until the iron wall was white[-hot]. And because of the very great heat he charged the wall with his shoulder and he

<sup>34</sup>§41. <sup>35</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 44; for the emendation, see pp. 207–8; cf. *Branwen*, edited by Thomson, pp. 36–37. <sup>36</sup>cf. *Branwen*, edited by Thomson, pp. 36–37, with references.

<sup>37</sup>*Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, edited by Gustav Neckel, revised by Hans Kuhn, 2 vols (Heidelberg, 1962–68), I, 66.11. For references to other fighting dogs in Old Icelandic literature, see Olrik, *Danmarks Heltedigtning*, I, 209; *Heroic Legends*, pp. 361–62.



broke out'); 'þeir hlaupa á þilin sva hart ok heimsliga, at þau brotna í sundr, ok komast sva út' ('they rush against the planks so hard and recklessly, that they are smashed apart, and thus they get themselves out').<sup>38</sup> This sort of escape is also implied by the fragmentary account in *Mesca Ulad*, one of the Irish analogues to this episode.<sup>39</sup> It is, of course, an obvious enough method, but contrasts with the alternative and less fantastic escape of Kari from Njall's burning hall in *Njals saga*, by leaping from the burning wall.<sup>40</sup>

Whatever the similarity of particular details, it is hard to imagine that this combination of motifs could be coincidental. How, and in what place or context, the motifs were first combined—Irish, Welsh, Scandinavian, some other, or a combination—is an open question. Judith Jesch argued for Orkney as the point of dissemination for the Scandinavian material in the *Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan*, but other possibilities can be envisaged.<sup>41</sup> That at least some of the shared motifs were borrowed into Scandinavian from Welsh is suggested by the horse-mutilation in the *Vita Sancti Cadoci*, particularly since the horse-mutilation is integral to *Branwen's* plot, but superficial to *Hrolfs saga's*. On the other hand, for some of the aspects I will discuss below, the weight of evidence is with Iceland. The dating of the *Four Branches* has been much discussed, and although no precise date has been agreed, they must have been written between the outer limits of about 1060 and the end of the twelfth century.<sup>42</sup> The date of *Hrolfs saga* is even less certain—our earliest manuscripts are of the seventeenth century—and all we can safely say is that it is most unlikely to have pre-dated the thirteenth century and could easily be later.<sup>43</sup> However, Arngrimur Jonsson's sixteenth-century Latin rendering of the lost *Skjoldunga saga*, which was a source for *Hrolfs saga*, mentions the horse-mutilation, ambush, and fire-leaping. Snorri Sturluson used this part of *Skjoldunga saga*, so the saga must have been composed by the early thirteenth century. Several relevant motifs in *Hrolfs saga kraka*, therefore, were first written down not long after *Branwen* may first have been written.<sup>44</sup> But *Skjoldunga*

<sup>38</sup>Pedeir Keinc, p. 36; *Hrolfs saga*, §44. <sup>39</sup>*Mesca Ulad*, edited by J. Carmichael Watson, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series, 13 (Dublin, 1967), pp. 38–40. Cf. *Branwen*, edited by Thomson, pp. xxxvi–xl; Mae Cana, *Branwen*, pp. 16–23. <sup>40</sup>*Brennu-Njals saga*, edited by Einar Ol. Sveinsson, IF, 12 (Reykjavik, 1954), §129. <sup>41</sup>Jesch, 'Norse Historical Traditions', pp. 145–47. <sup>42</sup>cf. Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Submission of Irish Kings in Fact and Fiction: Henry II, Bendigeidfran, and the Dating of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*', *CMCS*, 22 (Winter 1991), 31–61. <sup>43</sup>D. Slay, *The Manuscripts of Hrolfs saga kraka*, Bibliotheca Arnarnagana, 24 (Copenhagen, 1960), pp. 4–15. For the dating of *fornaldarsögur*, cf. Torfi H. Tulinius, *La Matière du nord: sagas légendaires et fiction dans la littérature islandaise en prose du XIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1995), pp. 45–59. <sup>44</sup>*Skjoldunga saga*, §12, edited by Bjarni Guðnason, *Danakonunga sǫgur: Skjoldunga saga, Knytlunga saga, Agrip af sǫgu Danakonunga*, IF, 35 (Reykjavik, 1982), pp. 26–36 for text; cf. pp. xxii–xxvii for dating.

*saga* is the earliest known Icelandic prose narrative to recount the period before Iceland's settlement, so we could hardly expect any earlier evidence for the story; and, in any case, the transmission of the material shared between *Hrólfs saga* and *Branwen* was almost certainly oral, and could have taken place at any time centuries before our texts were first written. Certainly, elements of each story are far older than any likely date for either as we know them.<sup>45</sup>

But however we may construe it, the connection between *Branwen Ferch Lŷr* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* opens up the possibility of seeking other points of comparison between the works, and between Old Icelandic and Middle Welsh tales generally, and accordingly I shall make some further comparisons. Some of these connections may suggest direct contact; others could be polygenetic, but the evident association of their contexts emphasizes the value of literary comparison. We have very little Middle Welsh narrative, and still less that is not translation, but reconstructing the literary context of a story is essential for understanding it, both as literature, and as evidence for the society which produced and consumed it. The importance of this method is emphasized by the analogue to Efnisien's horse-mutilation in the *Vita Sancti Cadoci*. Sioned Davies considered that 'the fact that he [Efnisien] mutilates the horses in a cruel way . . . reflects the perverted nature of his character'; Andrew Breeze went so far as to say that Efnisien's behaviour here is 'that of a psychopath'.<sup>46</sup> But St Cadog imposed just such a retribution upon thieves, and while other saints might have made a milder response, Cadog has not to my knowledge been characterized as a psychopath: considering the *Four Branches* without due attention to their literary-historical context can produce very misleading conclusions. As I shall argue below, regarding Efnisien's legal situation in this episode, Icelandic literature, as the product of a contemporaneous and, in Continental terms, a similarly peripheral and conservative society, can provide a model for further reconstruction of the social and literary context which the *Vita Sancti Cadoci* hints at, but for which so little evidence survives.

The capacity of Welsh and Icelandic societies to produce extremely similar narratives is emphasized by Walter Map, whose *De Nugis Curialium* (late twelfth century) is a complex but nonetheless under-used source for oral literature around the Welsh marches in our period. Walter tells a story about the inception of a family feud caused by a woman's provocative tongue, which resonates strongly

<sup>45</sup>For *Branwen*, cf. John T. Koch, 'Brân, Brennos: An Instance of Early Gallo-Brittonic History and Mythology', *CMCS*, 20 (Winter 1990), 1–20; for *Hrólfs saga*, cf. Jones, *History*, pp. 45–49. <sup>46</sup>Sioned Davies, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi: Pedair Keinc y Mabinogi* (Llandysul, 1993), p. 71; Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature*, p. 73.

with the narratives of *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, in the context of twelfth-century western Europe (and medieval Europe generally), prose was very unusual as the medium for (written) vernacular secular narrative, and the fact that Welsh, Icelandic, and Irish cultures all seem to have favoured prose makes their material particularly worthy of stylistic comparison.<sup>48</sup> As Walter emphasizes, however, Icelandic and Irish literature are by no means the only sources for comparison with Welsh, and I shall refer to other medieval literature where it seems appropriate.

A word on genre is necessary before considering the Icelandic material more closely. The sagas which I will compare with *Branwen* are found in two generic groups: the *fornaldarsögur* or 'legendary sagas', such as *Hrólfs saga kraka*, set on the Continent before the settlement of Iceland, and the *Íslendingasögur* or 'sagas of Icelanders', set principally in Iceland. These genre divisions are modern, and have rightly been questioned; but Stephen Mitchell's recent analysis and the terms' long-standing effectiveness testify to their applicability.<sup>49</sup> The generic contrast is lessened by the fact that the *Íslendingasögur* to which I refer show unusual affinities with the subject matter of the *fornaldarsögur*, but genre distinctions are still significant, as they can entail major differences of style which affect comparison with *Branwen*. *Fornaldarsögur* tend to be stylistically more like folktales than *Íslendingasögur*, with fewer (if any) genealogies, a simpler plot, and with the familiar opening formula 'There was a king called X who ruled over Y'.<sup>50</sup> In these points, *fornaldarsögur* are the more reminiscent of *Branwen*. On the other hand, where they include verse (which is consistently in Eddaic metre) it usually duplicates the prose content, whereas the *Íslendingasögur* contain *lausavísur* (which use skaldic metre), single stanzas which serve as important counterpoints to the prose narrative. These are, in their function and epigrammatic style, more similar to Efnisien's *englyn*. The prototypes of both these genres must pre-date the composition of *Branwen*, but when the distinctive differences we see in

<sup>47</sup>Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium: Courtiers' Trifles*, edited and translated by M. R. James, revised by C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1983), pp. 184–85. Cf. R. R. Davies, 'The Survival of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Wales', *History*, 54 (1969), 338–57. <sup>48</sup>The prospect of comparison was emphasized by Nora Kershaw Chadwick, 'Literary Tradition in the Old Norse and Celtic World', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 14 (1953–57), 164–99 (pp. 164–71). <sup>49</sup>Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (London, 1991), pp. 1–32. Cf. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Legendary Fiction in Medieval Iceland*, *Studia Islandica*, 30 (Reykjavík, 1971), pp. 1–24. <sup>50</sup>Ruth Righter-Gould, 'Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda: A Structural Analysis', *Scandinavian Studies*, 52 (1980), 423–41 (pp. 425–26); Alaric Hall, 'Changing Style and Changing Meaning: The Medieval Redactions of *Heiðreks saga*', forthcoming. Cf. Kathryn Hume, 'Beginnings and Endings in the Icelandic Family Sagas', *Modern Language Review*, 68 (1973), 593–606.

the saga corpus emerged is harder to say.<sup>51</sup> Thus, this caveat in place, I shall draw on both corpora in comparing *Branwen* with Icelandic sagas. It will be noted that the episodes where *Branwen* seems similar to *Hrólfs saga* tend to coincide with Efnisien's appearances in the story, and it is Efnisien whom I shall now consider more closely.

Commentators have frequently noted that Efnisien is the character who moves *Branwen*'s narrative forward, but have also expressed perplexity at his motivation: 'working against the peaceweaver are forces of irrational malice and hate ... incarnated in the figure of her half-brother Efnisien'.<sup>52</sup> Mac Cana sought to explain Efnisien as a reflex of the Irish character Bricriu Nemthenga ('poison-tongue').<sup>53</sup> As he emphasized, Bricriu exists, in narrative terms, to incite his people, the Ulstermen, to violence, and to this extent he is certainly reminiscent of Efnisien. But although Efnisien does cause strife after the marriage of Branwen to Matholwch, and again at the end of the story, he is consistent in causing strife only between the peoples of Britain and Ireland; Bricriu, on the other hand, specializes in provoking strife among the Ulstermen.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, on both occasions when the British are threatened—once by ambush, and once by the Irish employment of the *peir dadeni*—Efnisien saves them, whereas Bricriu seems never even to fight. Efnisien's role is in fact much less reminiscent of Bricriu than of the Óðinn-heroes of Scandinavian literature, such as Egill Skalla-Grímsson and Starkaðr Stórvirksson. Egill was probably a historical character whereas Starkaðr has no sound historical credentials, and accordingly Egill is a figure of the *Íslendingasögur*, and Starkaðr of the *fornaldarsögur*; but both also are characters in literature, and it is as such that they will be considered.

Óðinn-heroes, as scholars have named them, are heroes who worship Óðinn and, seemingly, owe their successes to his patronage. They also share narrative motifs with him.<sup>55</sup> For example, in the *Prose Edda*, Óðinn, the god who loves (and, indeed, as god of war, exists) to cause trouble, throws an excellent whetstone over some slaves who are mowing. They all rush to catch it, and jugulate one another with their scythes.<sup>56</sup> Egill Skalla-Grímsson is a warrior and a poet, and Óðinn, as god of war and poetry, is naturally his patron:

<sup>51</sup>Some *lausavísur*, and accordingly the stories which provide their explanatory contexts, are believed to be as old as their sagas claim—sometimes, then, dating from the tenth century. Many of these must have been transmitted with a prose frame—an incipient saga—from the point of their creation. <sup>52</sup>Welsh, 'Branwen', p. 8. <sup>53</sup>Mac Cana, *Branwen*, pp. 79–82. <sup>54</sup>cf. Dáithí Ó hÓgain, *Myth, Legend and Romance: An Encyclopædia of the Irish Folk Tradition* (London, 1990), s.n. Bricriu. <sup>55</sup>cf. E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London, 1964), pp. 205–13; James Milroy, 'Starkaðr: An Essay in Interpretation', *Saga-Book*, 19 (1974–77), 118–38; Kaaren Grimstad, 'The Giant as Heroic Model: The Case of Egill and Starkaðr', *Scandinavian Studies*, 48 (1976), 284–98. <sup>56</sup>*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, edited by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1931), p. 83.

Egill's poetry reflects this.<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, in old age Egill intends to take his cache of silver to the *Alþingi* and throw it in the air, in the hope that 'allr þingheimrinn berðisk' ('everyone at the *þing* might fight each other').<sup>58</sup>

The analogue of Starkaðr is a particularly close one to Efnisien. Starkaðr is most fully depicted in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* and in *Gautreks saga*, and his Odinic associations are explicit in each.<sup>59</sup> Like Óðinn, Saxo's Starkatherus is an inciter, provoking Ingellus to avenge the slaying of his father despite the fact that Ingellus has married the slayers' sister. For Saxo, the successful incitement represents a triumph of heroic values over the decadent 'Theutoniæ moribus' ('customs of Teutonia'), though he is aware of its tragic implications even so: 'Nec tamen leves eius pœnas pendit, cum loca, in quibus fortissimum senem discubitus repulsa sugillaverat, postmodum fratrum suorum cladibus cruentata conspiceret' ('She did not, however, pay his penalty lightly, when the places in which she mocked the most valiant old man with her refusal of a place at the table she afterwards saw made bloody with the destruction of her brothers').<sup>60</sup> We might see Efnisien as holding similar views. The opposite perspective is taken by *Beowulf*, which also recounts the story of Ingellus (under the name of Ingeld), again with an Odinic-looking character—the 'eald æscwiga' ('old spear-warrior')—in the role of inciter.<sup>61</sup> *Beowulf* emphasizes the implications of the incitement principally for the relations between Ingeld's people, the Heathobards, and the people of his wife Freawaru, the Danes, though the poem considers its implications for the personal relationship of Ingeld and Freawaru as well.<sup>62</sup> This perspective is more like that of *Branwen* as a whole, and of Branwen herself. The tension between these views can be seen to be playing itself out in *Branwen*, as Branwen works from one perspective, and Efnisien from the other. But however he was vilified, Starkatherus remained a great hero to the Danes, repeatedly helping them out with such efficacy that he has been compared to the Icelandic *bjargvættir*, the helpful spirits who appear from nowhere in time of need; and here too, we find resonances with Efnisien, who almost presciently undertakes a reconnaissance of the hall where the Irish have laid their ambush.<sup>63</sup>

Efnisien's narrative role seems to be paralleled more neatly, then, by medieval Scandinavian literature than by Irish. Efnisien may also be compared with Óðinn-heroes in more specific ways. His first

<sup>57</sup>cf. Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Art of Poetry and the Figure of the Poet in Egils Saga', *Parergon*, 22 (1978), 3–12. <sup>58</sup>*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, §85, edited by Sigurður Nordal, ÍF, 2 (Reykjavík, 1933). <sup>59</sup>*Gautreks saga*, §7; *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, edited by J. Olrik and H. Ræder, 2 vols (Copenhagen, 1931–57), pp. 151–53. <sup>60</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 166–67. <sup>61</sup>line 2042. <sup>62</sup>lines 2063–69. <sup>63</sup>Marlene Ciklamini, 'The Problem of Starkaðr', *Scandinavian Studies*, 43 (1971), 169–88 (pp. 172–76).

appearance in *Branwen* is interesting in this respect. At its opening, *Branwen* establishes the genealogical relationships of the British ruling family, and in this genealogical context Efnisien appears as one of two contrasted brothers:

Y deu uroder un uam ac ef, meibon oedyn y Eurosswyd o'e uam ynteu Penardun, uerch Ueli uab Mynogan. A'r neill o'r gueisson hynny, gwas da oed; ef a barei tangeued y rwg y deu lu, ban udydynt lidyawcaf; sef oed hwnnw Nissyen. Y llall a barei ymlad y rwng y deu uroder, ban uei uwyaf yd ymgerynt.<sup>64</sup>

The two brothers of the same mother as him [Bendigeidfran], they were sons of Euroswydd by his mother Penarddun, daughter of Beli son of Mynogan. And the one of those sons was a good lad; he caused peace between (the) two armies, when they tended to be most angry; that one was Nisien. The other caused battle between (the) two brothers, when they were loving one another most.

This passage prepares the audience for the events of *Branwen* (or reminds them thereof, if they know the story). Although the description uses the habitual form *bydynt*, and the definite article *y* need not have a definite force in 'y deu lu' and 'y deu uroder', at one level at least it prefigures the progress of the story, and the role of Efnisien in it as inciter. The 'deu uroder' between whom Efnisien causes 'ymlad' cannot be himself and Nisien, or he would be causing battle when he was himself most loving. We might suppose various fraternal factions whom Efnisien might incite, but the most obvious referent of the phrase, given foreknowledge of the story, is the battle which Efnisien is to cause between Bendigeidfran and his future brother-in-law, Matholwch, a reading which is suggested by the Red Book of Hergest, which says that Nisien caused peace not between *y deu lu*, but *y deulu*, 'his family, war-band'.<sup>65</sup>

This sort of verbal contrast between brothers (as opposed, for example, to the general contrast between characters such as Cain and Abel) is very common in Old Icelandic literature, and, according to the relevant motif-indexes, absent from medieval Irish, English, and French literatures.<sup>66</sup> Sagas use the motif in two ways: to contrast the clever brother with the foolish brother (who turns out successfully as the story proceeds); or to contrast the good brother with the evil

<sup>64</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 29. <sup>65</sup>cf. *Branwen*, edited by Thomson, p. 20. <sup>66</sup>A list is given by Inger M. Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, Bibliotheca Arnarnag-næana, 27 (Copenhagen, 1966), under AT P251.5.4, to which may be added the contrasted brothers Þórólfr and Grímr Kveld-Úlfsson, and Þórólfr and Egill Skalla-Grímsson in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, §§ 1 and 31. For other literatures, cf. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books*

brother, or, as in several cases, the good brother with the Odinic brother—here, the evil brother becomes the focus of the story. In both types, as with the Welsh instance, the foolish/evil brother is mentioned second. An example in the Icelandic material is that of the sons of Höfundr and Hervör in *Heiðreks saga*:

Þau Hervör áttu tvá syni. Hét annarr Angantýr, en annarr Heiðrekr. . . . Angantýr var líkr feðr sínum at skaplyndi ok vildi hverjum manni gott. Höfundr unni honum mikit ok þar með öll alþýða. Ok svá margt gott sem hann gerði, þá gerði Heiðrekr enn fleira illt. Hervör unni honum mikit. Fóstri Heiðreks hét Gizurr.<sup>67</sup>

He and Hervör had two sons. One was called Angantýr and the other Heiðrekr. . . . Angantýr was like his father in temperament and wished well for everyone. Höfundr loved him greatly and so did the whole people. But however many good deeds he might do, then Heiðrekr would do the more evil. Hervör loved him greatly. Heiðrekr's foster-father was called Gizurr.

Gizurr is an Óðinn-name (indeed, Gizurr later incites Heiðrekr's sons to fight each other, dedicating the slain to Óðinn), which is a clear pointer to Heiðrekr's future characteristics.<sup>68</sup> The similarity of Angantýr and Heiðrekr to Nisien and Efnisien is obvious, and the shared motif seems unlikely to be wholly coincidental.

Efnisien's behaviour in mutilating Matholwch's horses is also worthy of closer consideration than it has yet received. As my quotations above suggest, commentators have emphasized Efnisien's malice, and a malicious deed the mutilation certainly is. But as I have indicated, it need not have been seen as an unreasonable means of avenging a crime or insult. Efnisien prefixes his action with the statement 'Ay yuelly y gwnaethant wy am uorwyn kystal a honno, ac yn chwaer y minheu, y rodi heb uyghanyat i? Ny ellynt wy tremic uwy arnaf i' ('And it is thus they did regarding a maiden as good as she, and my own sister, to give her without my permission? They could not have done a greater insult to me').<sup>69</sup> Welsh has claimed that 'there appears to be no reason why he should have been

and *Local Legends*, revised edition, 6 vols (repr. London, 1966); Tom Peete Cross, *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature*, Indiana University Publications, Folklore Series, 7 (repr. New York, 1969); Gerald Bordman, *Motif-Index of the English Metrical Romances*, Folklore Fellows Communications, 190 (Helsinki, 1963); Anita Guerreau-Jalabert, *Index des motifs narratifs dans les romans arthuriens français en vers (XIIe–XIIIe siècles)/Motif-Index of French Arthurian Verse Romances (XIIth–XIIIth Cent.)*, Publications romanes et françaises, 202 (Geneva, 1992). <sup>67</sup>§5. <sup>68</sup>For Heiðrekr as Óðinn-hero, see Tulinius, *Matière*, pp. 99–100. For Gizurr as Odinic, see Otto Höfler, 'Hat die Heidrekssaga das Hunnenschlachtlied richtig verstanden?', in *Fourth International Saga Conference* (n. 2 above). <sup>69</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 33.

consulted', but this is not necessarily so.<sup>70</sup> *Festa pátrr*, the betrothal section of *Grágás*, the Icelandic law-code, declares that:

EN þa er faðir fastnandi dottor sínar. EN þa scal bróðir, samfeðri fastna systor sína. EN ef eigi er bróðir þa scal fastna móðir dottor sína.<sup>71</sup>

And then a father is the betrother of his daughter. And then must a brother likewise betroth his sister. And if there is not a brother, then the mother must betroth her daughter.

That is, if a woman's father is dead, her brothers must take over his responsibility to dispose of her in marriage. The motif AT T131.1.1 *Brother's consent for marriage needed* is common both in sagas and in medieval French literature.<sup>72</sup> It is evident from the surviving Welsh laws that women were given in marriage by their kinsmen, and in the *Four Branches* Llŷr is nowhere to be seen. It is, therefore, entirely plausible that Efnisien had some responsibility, and accordingly a right, to arrange Branwen's marriage.<sup>73</sup> Efnisien may be using his rights in order to provoke discord, but it nonetheless seems likely that he is within his rights, and acting, here, as a medieval Welshman would think proper.

Efnisien's third appearance emphasizes his similarity to Óðinn-heroes. Entering the hall which the Irish have built, he 'wnaeth . . . edrych golygon orwyllt antrugarawc ar hyt y ty' ('he looked about throughout the house with very wild, ruthless glances').<sup>74</sup> This may seem a simple enough depiction. But it is curious to note that such a description is extremely unusual in our surviving native Middle Welsh prose. While descriptions of dress and appearance are frequent, the portrayal of character by means of physical appearance is very rare. The loss of colour in one character is used to betray love-sickness to another in *Math Fab Mathonwy* and *Culhwch*, and to this extent information about emotions is encoded in appearance; but emotions are not character, and the implications of the changed colour are expounded, as the implications of Efnisien's appearance are not.<sup>75</sup> Blodeuwedd may be 'un uorwyn deccaf a thelediwaf a welas dyn eiroet' ('the one fairest and most beautiful maiden whom a man ever saw'), but there is no equivalent in Middle Welsh to the celebrated words of Hrútr with reference to a similarly treacherous woman, Hallgerðr 'Ærit fōgr er mæR sjá, ok munu margir þess gjalda; en hitt veit ek eigi, hvaðan þjófsaugu eru kominn í ættir várar' ('The

<sup>70</sup>Welsh, 'Branwen', p. 8. <sup>71</sup>Vilhjálmur Finsen, *Grágás efter det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 334 fol., Staðarhólsbók* (Copenhagen, 1879), p. 155. <sup>72</sup>Boberg, *Motif-Index*; Guerreau-Jalabert, *Index des motifs*; cf. J. Jochens, 'Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life and Literature', *Scandinavian Studies*, 58 (1986), 142-76. <sup>73</sup>See n. 12. <sup>74</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 42. <sup>75</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 67-68; *Culhwch*, p. 3.



maid is beautiful enough to look at, and many will pay for that; but what I don't know is how thief's eyes have come into our family').<sup>76</sup> Old Icelandic literature provides numerous general analogues for the device of expressing character through appearance, often in association with Odinic characters; the *Nibelungenlied*, on the other hand, offers a rather specific one with similar implications.

In the sagas, particularly the *Íslendingasögur*, physical descriptions betraying hidden characteristics are an essential feature of the thumbnail sketches given to characters as they are introduced, like the description of Glámr, who is later to become a troll, in *Grettis saga*: 'Þessi maðr var mikill vexti ok undarligr í yfirbragði, gráeygr ok opineygr, úlfgrár á hárslit' ('This man was well-built and extraordinary in appearance, grey-eyed and wide-eyed, wolf-grey in hair-colour').<sup>77</sup> The descriptions are much used in the *fornaldarsögur* to betray to the reader that a character might be, or be like, Óðinn. Thus, when Svipdagr enters Aðils's hall in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, being the vanguard of Hrólfr's approach much as Efnisien precedes the Britons, Aðils describes him with:

Dalr er í hnakka,  
auga er ór höfði,  
ör er í enni,  
högg eru á hendi tvau.<sup>78</sup>

A valley's in the neck-nape, an eye nicked from the head, a scar upon the forehead, two wounds scored upon the arms.

Starkaðr's hideous mutilation by his wounds and age is frequently noted, and Svipdagr is given a similar appearance here. The reminiscence is made clear by the fact that Svipdagr, like Óðinn, lacks an eye. Efnisien must have made a similar impression when he entered the hall of the Irish.

In view of the similarities between *Branwen* and *Kudrun* already observed, the use in similar contexts in the *Nibelungenlied* of the same device as we see in *Branwen* might also be profitably noted. Like the Welsh material, the *Nibelungenlied* rarely uses physical descriptions to betray character; when it does, the device is usually associated with wildness and violence.<sup>79</sup> Thus, a warrior remarks of the fierce Volker:

disen videlære      wolde ich nicht bestân,

<sup>76</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 83; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, §1. <sup>77</sup>*Grettis saga*, §32. <sup>78</sup>§40. Cf. *Völsunga saga*, §12; *Örvar-Odds saga*, §19; *Hrólfs saga kraka*, §46. The edition ends this verse with a question mark, which I have omitted. <sup>79</sup>cf. *Das Nibelungenlied: Mittelhochdeutscher Text und Übertragung*, edited and translated by Helmut Brackert, 2 vols (Frankfurt am Main, 1970-71), I, stanzas 411-15; II, stanzas 1665 and 1749.

durch sîne swinde blicke,            die ich an im gesehen hân.<sup>80</sup>

I would not face this fiddler because of his evil glances, which I have seen upon him.

Most striking is the comment made on the appearance of Hagen, the treacherous and strife-provoking warrior who murders Siegfried, when he arrives in Brünhild's hall:

Der dritte der gesellen            der ist sô gremelich,  
(unt doch mit schœnem lîbe,            kûneginne rîch)  
von swinden sînen blicken,            der er sô vil getuot.  
Er ist in sînen sinnen,            ich wæne, grimmé gemuot.<sup>81</sup>

The third of these companions is so fearsome (although with fair appearance, mighty queen) because of his evil glances, of which he gave so many. He is in his temperament, I suppose, of fierce mind.

This is not, necessarily, to suggest the direct influence of Scandinavian or Middle High German narrative style on *Branwen*, or vice versa—the evidence, though suggestive, is too slight—but it emphasizes that we should pay especial attention to Efnisien's *gorwyllt*, *antrugarawc* appearance, and consider the resonances of such appearances in Germanic literature.

The episode of Efnisien in the hall of the Irish proceeds with a threefold account of how Efnisien killed the Irishmen as they were in their bags: 'wnaeth . . . guascu y benn, yny glyw y uyssed yn ymanodi yn y ureichell drwy yr ascwrn' ('he squeezed his head until he felt his fingers pincering the brain through the bone').<sup>82</sup> Efnisien proves able to do this even when his victim is wearing a helmet. This sort of superhuman grip again reminds us of the troll-like Egill and Starkaðr; this and Efnisien's appearance here are also reminiscent of a berserk rage.

This is not, perhaps, surprising, insofar as Efnisien shares his mother, Penarddun, with Bendigeidfran, who for his part is so large that he cannot be contained within ship or house, and may cross the sea by wading.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the description of Efnisien as he enters the hall of the Irish resonates somewhat with the description of Bendigeidfran which Branwen gives in response to the watchmen mistaking his eyes for lakes: they are 'ef . . . yn edrych ar yr ynys honn, llidyawc yw' ('he . . . looking on this island, he is angry').<sup>84</sup> We

<sup>80</sup>ibid., II, stanza 1795. <sup>81</sup>ibid., I, stanza 413. <sup>82</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 42. <sup>83</sup>We know nothing more about Efnisien's father, Euroswydd, though it is interesting that his name seems to include the word *oswyd* 'enemy' (cf. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 351), since Efnisien's includes *efnys* 'enemy' (cf. *Pedeir Keinc*, p. 163). <sup>84</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 40.

might, therefore, expect some sort of similarity between the two half-brothers. The comments of Preben Meulengracht Sørensen are worth quoting at length in this context:

The description of the hero's birth is quite usual in fantastic literature, *fornaldarsögur*, heroic poems, and folk-tales. The hero, with his unusual qualities, must have an unusual origin, and his exceptional position is explained by the fact that the alien in him is overcome by the extreme exogamous connection [i.e. sexual contact between one within society and one completely outside it]. It is a necessary element in this explanation that the descent be agnatic, that is to say, that it is the male members of society who beget the hero with a woman from the outside. In the patriarchal society of Icelandic farmers—with traditions from Viking-Age warrior society—such a contact could be considered normal and positive. But with equal logic the converse situation—sexual relations between a man from the outside and a woman from the community—is condemned as an unacceptable violation of the norms.<sup>85</sup>

This sort of connection produces the *fornaldarsaga* hero Gautrekr and many of the *Æsir*,<sup>86</sup> in the Celtic-speaking world, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* describes how Connla, Cú Chulainn's superhuman and potentially heroic son, was begotten on Aífe (Cú Chulainn kills Connla, but it seems clear that the fault here is with the father, not the son), while Pryderi was begotten in accordance with the same paradigm.<sup>87</sup> Sørensen's findings thus offer a possible paradigm for Bendigeidfran's birth.<sup>88</sup>

*Gautreks saga* also offers the inverse paradigm: Starkaðr Stórvirksson is born when Stórvirkr, himself the son of a princess who was abducted by a giant, abducts the daughter of Freki, earl of Hálogaland.<sup>89</sup> In the saga Starkaðr goes on to sacrifice his foster-brother to Óðinn and presumably, outside the saga, to do the various evil deeds mentioned by Saxo Grammaticus: 'The community seeks to incorporate the half-alien by making him into a full kinsman, but this fails'.<sup>90</sup> The same pattern in birth and life may be found in the troublesome god Loki and in the ancestries of Heiðrekr, Egill, and

<sup>85</sup>Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Starkaðr, Loki, and Egill Skallagrímsson', in *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, edited by J. Tucker (London, 1989), pp. 146–59 (p. 148). <sup>86</sup>Sørensen, 'Starkaðr', pp. 147–48 and 150–51; cf. *Gautreks saga*, §1. <sup>87</sup>For Connla, see 'The Death of Conla', edited and translated by Kuno Meyer, *Ériu*, 1 (1904), 113–21; cf. Joanne Findon, *A Woman's Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle* (London, 1997), pp. 84–106; for Pryderi see *Pedeir Keinc*, passim. <sup>88</sup>A further coincidence is that Gautrekr is the son of an eponymous ancestor-figure, Gauti, king of Gautland, and Bendigeidfran is the grandson (or nephew) of Beli, the most popular ancestor-figure in medieval Wales, who may have been the eponymous ancestor of the Belgae (cf. Koch, 'Brân'). <sup>89</sup>§3. <sup>90</sup>Sørensen, 'Starkaðr', pp. 148–49.

Grettir, and its similarity to what we know of Efnisien is clear.<sup>91</sup> While this pattern does not work perfectly for Efnisien—for example, the union that begat Efnisien also begat the peaceful Nisien—something like it may be working in his characterization. Víkarr and Bendigeidfran are bound in foster- and half-brotherhood to the semi-socialized Starkaðr and Efnisien, and these kings both die because of the (Odinic) misdeeds of their brothers. The paradigm might also illuminate the fact that Bendigeidfran does not consult Efnisien (the 'half-alien') about Branwen's marriage.

In less specific terms than those outlined by Sørensen, this may have been a widespread paradigm in medieval literature. Another analogue to Efnisien's relationship with Bendigeidfran is the relationship between King Arthur and Sir Kay in Robert de Boron's *Merlin* (and, to a lesser extent, its reflexes).<sup>92</sup> Robert's poem is from the early thirteenth century, although the relevant part survives only in a later prose version. Artus, the son of Utiierpandragon by Utiier's adultery with Egerne, is taken by Merlin to be fostered by Antor. Antor's wife suckles Artus, but her natural son Qex has instead to be suckled by 'une garce' ('a peasant-woman'), 'une femme estrange' ('a woman of a different kin-group').<sup>93</sup> Arthur, of course, becomes a great king, whereas Kay becomes the irascible inciter of his court. Kay, admittedly, rarely causes more trouble than is needed to precipitate an adventure, but the principle stands.<sup>94</sup> I claim no close connection between Welsh material and *Merlin* here, though it is interesting that 'The only Continental story which seems to have found favour with the [later Welsh] bards is that of Arthur's fostering by Cei's father'.<sup>95</sup>

These analogues suggest that as soon as a native audience heard the genealogy at the beginning of *Branwen*—let alone the *Two brothers as contrasts* motif—their expectations were raised. Here, then, a connection with Icelandic literature is possible, but what I stress is the applicability of its paradigm, and other paradigms like it, for understanding Efnisien's place in the characters' relationships and the narrative structure of *Branwen*.

The association with Kay is curious, if probably only coincidental, in the context of the last element of the foiled ambush episode. We

<sup>91</sup>cf. *ibid.*, pp. 152–59; Heiðrekr is only given such an ancestry in the U- and H-texts of the saga; for the U version (on which H is based), see *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London, 1960), pp. 66–68. <sup>92</sup>I am grateful to Carl Pyrdum for directing me to this reference. <sup>93</sup>*Robert de Boron: Merlin, roman du XIIIe siècle*, edited by Alexandre Micha (Geneva, 1979), pp. 265 and 277. Cf. Linda Gowans, *Cei and the Arthurian Legend* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 108–10. <sup>94</sup>For worse misdemeanours, and their unusualness, see *ibid.*, pp. 104–7, 112–14, and 164. <sup>95</sup>*ibid.*, p. 130. Cf. Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, pp. cxxxvii and 306.

return again to our Odinic theme, for here Efnisien, like Egill, Star-kaðr, and Grettir, proves to be a poet:

Yssit yn y boly hwnn amryw ulawt,  
Keimeit, kynniueit, disgynneit yn trin,  
Rac kydwyr cad barawt.<sup>96</sup>

There is in this bag a sort of flour, champions, warriors, attackers in conflict, prepared for battle against battle-men.

That the one verse in *Branwen* (one of only five stanzas in the *Four Branches*, three of which occur together) should be in the mouth of a character who seems so similar to Óðinn-heroes, in a story sharing much of its narrative with a *fornaldarsaga*, is unlikely to be pure coincidence. Efnisien's stanza is used in the same way as many skaldic verses are in *Íslendingasögur*, which frequently employ a sardonic, punning skaldic verse to punctuate their narrative.<sup>97</sup> Such a usage is likely enough to have been polygenetic, but given the difficulty some commentators have had with the contrast between the use of verse in the *Four Branches* and in the supposedly prose-framed early *englynion*, the close parallel in literary technique between the *Four Branches* and the *Íslendingasögur* is worth emphasizing.<sup>98</sup> That poems punctuated prose narrative (and at times motivated plot developments) more generally in Middle Welsh story is shown by an episode in *Culhwch ac Olwen*. Cei and Bedwyr attack Dillus while he sleeps, in order to pluck out his beard, but when Cei gives the beard to Arthur, Arthur says:

Kynnllyuan a oruc Kei  
O uaryf Dillus uab Eurei.  
Pei iach dy anghew uydei.<sup>99</sup>

Kei made a leash from the beard of Dillus son of Eurei. If he were healthy he would have been your death.

The narrative continues:

Ac am hynny y sorres Kei hyt pan uu abreid y uilwyr yr Ynys honn

<sup>96</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 43. <sup>97</sup>For Efnisien's puns, see *Pedeir Keinc*, pp. 203–4; cf. *Branwen*, edited by Thomson, p. 35. <sup>98</sup>A useful consideration of the problem from an Irish perspective is Proinsias Mac Cana, 'Notes on the Combination of Prose and Verse in Early Irish Narrative', in *Early Irish Literature—Media and Communication / Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit in der frühen irischen Literatur*, edited by Stephen N. Tranter and Hildegard L. C. Tristram (Tübingen, 1989), pp. 125–47. For a handy survey, with references to the prospect of Old Irish influence on prosimetrical saga-style, see Nicholas Jacobs, 'Celtic Saga and the Contexts of Old English Elegiac Poetry', *Études celtiques*, 26 (1989), 95–142 (pp. 112–16 and n. 78). <sup>99</sup>*Culhwch*, p. 35.

tangneuedu y rwng Kei ac Arthur. Ac eissoes, nac yr anghyfneth ar Arthur nac yr llad y wyr, nyt ymyrrwys Kei yn reit gyt ac ef o hynny allan.<sup>100</sup>

And Cei became angry about that, so that it was with difficulty that the warriors of this island made peace between Cei and Arthur. And even so, Cei had nothing to do with him [Arthur] in need, neither because of any misfortune upon Arthur nor because of the slaying of his men, on account of that.

Arthur is not as good a poet as Efnisien, but, sure enough, Cei disappears from *Culhwch* at this point. Insult, again, is a common function of skaldic verse in the hands of Egill and Grettir; Saxo's Starkatherus also uses poetry to incite Ingellus. As Bromwich and Evans noted, Arthur is associated with poetic composition elsewhere in medieval Welsh material, so the fact that he sings an *englyn* is unsurprising.<sup>101</sup> That he should sing an incitement against his own champion with no apparent motivation is harder to understand, though we might perhaps suppose that the stanza represents an inversion of his and Cei's usual behaviour, as we find it in the later Continental material, due to *Culhwch*'s parodic character.<sup>102</sup>

Let us now consider Efnisien's fourth and final appearance in *Branwen*. His behaviour here has long caused puzzlement among scholars. I hope I have shown by now that, in the context of similar Scandinavian characters and stories, Efnisien's throwing Gwern into the fire is not an astonishing development, *anhebig* ('unthinkable') though the deed may have been.<sup>103</sup> The action is not a random provocation of strife, but a deliberate incitement of the British against the Irish. Efnisien's behaviour becomes yet more logical when we consider that of all the Britons in the hall, it seems that only he knows the full extent of the Irishmen's duplicity, since only he knows of their attempted ambush. He has good reason, therefore, not to accept a treaty from them. But as the fight ensues, and the Irish replenish their forces by means of the *peir dadeni*, Efnisien utters 'yn y uedwl' ('in his mind') 'gwae ui uy mot yn achaws y'r wydwic honn o wyr Ynys y Kedyrn; a meuhl ymi . . . ony cheissaf i waret rac hynn' ('woe to me that I should be the cause of this slaughter of the

<sup>100</sup>ibid. <sup>101</sup>ibid., p. 149. <sup>102</sup>cf. Joan Radner, 'Interpreting Medieval Irony: The Case of *Culhwch ac Olwen*', *CMCS*, 16 (Winter 1988), 41–59. <sup>103</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 43. The closest analogue to Efnisien's throwing Gwern into the fire which I have found occurs in the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, edited by Umberto Moricca, *Gregorii Magnii Dialogi* (Rome, 1924). In 1.10 (pp. 60–61), a *malignus spiritus* ('evil spirit'), later identified as the *antiquus hostis* ('ancient enemy', i.e. the devil), having been cast out of the body it had previously possessed, takes on human form and slanders its exorcist. The spirit is taken in as a guest by a man curious about these slanders, and the spirit proceeds to take his child and cast it into the hearth. Viewed in this context—one widely known in medieval Europe—Efnisien's action is truly diabolical.

men of the Island of the Mighty; and shame on me . . . unless I seek deliverance from this'); he proceeds to get into the *peir dadeni* by pretending to be a slain Irishman, and breaks it apart, breaking his heart in so doing.<sup>104</sup>

These actions have previously been understood to show repentance on Efnisien's part—he realizes the evil of his actions, and seeks to undo their harm—and, as Catherine E. Byfield said, 'His self-sacrifice . . . at once both confuses and gratifies the reader. . . . the confusion stems from the inconsistency of this selflessness compared with his previous behaviour'.<sup>105</sup> But, especially given Efnisien's explicit awareness of the nature of his deeds as he casts Gwern into the fire—'ys anhebic a gyflauan gan y tylwyth y wneuthur, a wnaf i yr awr honn' ('it is unthinkable among the family to carry out the slaughter which I will now carry out')—this interpretation sits uncomfortably with what we know of his character.<sup>106</sup> I suggest that things become clearer, however, when we note that Efnisien resolves to break the cauldron immediately after its employment has been described: the *peir dadeni*, rather than the battle, is the obvious cause of Efnisien's statement. It is Efnisien's fault that the Irish have the cauldron—Bendigeidfran gave it to Matholwch as part of the reparation for Efnisien's first incitement. Efnisien's actions are not obviously aimed at returning peace, but at bringing victory to his own people, by rectifying his own role in causing their tactical predicament. This reading lends an attractive symmetry to the narrative of *Branwen*: not only does the very beginning of the story allude to the battle, but Efnisien's last deed refers to his first. He enters the story contrasted with his peace-loving brother Nisien, and leaves it compared to his peace-loving sister Branwen—Efnisien utters a 'gwae ui' phrase, and dies because his heart breaks as he himself breaks the cauldron into 'pedwar dryll' ('four parts'); Branwen likewise says 'gwae ui', and her heart breaks in sorrow for the slaughter she has caused; she is buried, for no otherwise obvious reason, in a 'bed petruall' ('four-sided grave').<sup>107</sup> In this comparison especially, we might see Efnisien not only as a dangerous character, but, to risk an anachronistic term, a dangerously nationalist one.

As recent research has suggested, then, associations between medieval Scandinavian and Welsh literature are more in evidence than commentators once supposed, and *Branwen Ferch Llŷr* can be read from the perspective of this cultural interaction. This being so, previous attempts to show connections between the literatures, such as

<sup>104</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 44. <sup>105</sup>Catherine E. Byfield, 'Character and Conflict in the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 40 (1993), 51–72 (pp. 60–61); cf. Mac Cana, *Branwen*, p. 82; Sioned Davies, *Four Branches*, p. 72.

<sup>106</sup>*Pedeir Keinc*, p. 43. <sup>107</sup>*ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

those mentioned at the beginning of this study, and that by Nora Chadwick, might stand more favourable reassessment.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, other analogues adduced hint at the value of viewing the native Welsh tales not only in the well-established contexts of medieval Welsh or Irish literature, or international folktale, but of the Continental romances, *historiae*, and similar works, like *Kudrun*, with which they were roughly contemporaneous. Even if direct contacts cannot be argued—and it is in the nature of the evidence that such connections are hard to establish—we may hope to find models for the literary and social contexts of Welsh literature for which the sparse Welsh evidence provides so little. In 1992, Mac Cana reiterated his support for Gruffydd's statement that 'the outstanding characteristic of *Branwen* is the excessively large number of "loose ends" in the narrative and a vast amount of incoherence and confusion'.<sup>109</sup> While one might question the 'excess' of their number, *Branwen* does contain some loose ends—as a work of literature, being finite in extent, must. But I hope that by using Scandinavian analogues in this way, I have been able to tie up a few of the more significant ones.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>108</sup>cf. n. 1; Chadwick, 'Literary Tradition', pp. 173–77. <sup>109</sup>Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, second edition, Writers of Wales (Cardiff, 1992), p. 40. <sup>110</sup>Earlier versions of this paper were delivered to the Cambridge University Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic Society, and the Glasgow Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, for whose many valuable comments I am grateful. I am particularly indebted to Thomas Clancy, Harriet Thomsett, Beth Fox, and Paul Bibire, for kindly commenting on drafts of this paper, and thank them duly.