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New stories from the Mabinogion and Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi: Texts, Narratives and Tradition[1]

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This paper aims to explore the migration of narrative elements from four medieval Welsh tales known as the Four Branches of the Mabinogi into four recent English-language novels which are part of Welsh publisher Seren's series New Stories from the Mabinogion. Russel Celyn Jones's The Ninth Wave*, Owen Sheers's* White Ravens*, Lloyd Jones's* See How They Run*, and Gwyneth Lewis's* The Meat Tree *bear an explicit textual relationship to the Four Branches of the Mabinogi, a textual whole of unknown authorship. This affords an opportunity to examine the workings of what constitutes a textual tradition, both diachronically and synchronically. The article relies on Dutch cultural theorist Mieke Bal's structuralist theory of narrative, on Welsh philologist Sioned Davies's analyses of the medieval tales, and on Slovak literary scholar Anton Popovič's view of tradition in terms of prototexts and metatexts. The methodology chosen consists of identifying textual variables and invariables in order to capture possible ways of examining relationships between related texts of different periods and languages within a corpus of linguistically encoded messages of a geographically defined community.*

Keywords
Tradition; narrative; structuralism; Anglo-Welsh; Welsh; Celtic Studies; Mabinogi; Seren

Introduction

Y traddodiad hardd ydyw, yr hen ddweud o'r newydd yw, reads the couplet motto of Cymdeithas Cerdd Dafod, a literary society devoted to promoting Welsh language poetry in "the strict metres", a system of prosodic forms composed in

intricate patterns of consonance and assonance, which developed in medieval Wales and has since been one of the hallmarks of Welsh literature. "The tradition is beautiful, it is the old said anew". The definite article catches the eye and ear, refer as it does to the inherited forms of bardic poetry and to the whole corpus of Welsh textual culture. While the Middle Ages saw prolific production of texts in the Welsh vernacular and in Latin, with a fairly complex interchange of cultural content between the two linguistic media, it was not until the start of the 20th century that one could observe a similar process of continuous cross-pollination between the Welsh- and English-language traditions.

This paper deals with one particular case of this on-going interchange, the English-language Welsh publisher Seren's project "New Stories from the Mabinogion" (2009–2013). Seren invited several prominent contemporary writers to retell eleven medieval Welsh tales, a corpus of prose narratives collectively known as the Mabinogion. The project bears a number of characteristics that might be considered typical of the contemporary cultural landscape of Wales.

Several of the authors involved are fluent in Welsh and in English. Some of them, e.g., Gwyneth Lewis, Lloyd Jones, and Fflur Dafydd, write in both languages, integrating specifically Welsh cultural content with the heritage of English literature and other literatures in the world's vernaculars. At the beginning of the 21st century, Welsh literary tradition no longer consists of two parallel linguistic strands. The following sections discuss the workings of tradition, i.e., the modes wherein various narrative elements and motifs that make up a medieval Welsh tale can be integrated into a contemporary Welsh novel.

Slovak structuralist Anton Popovič, a rather forgotten scholar of global communication studies, sought to capture the elusive functions of tradition. In his view, tradition is a dynamic process which unfolds at an intersection of the past, present and future of a living community, a synchronic condition of culture containing both the actual realisations of historical and contemporary acts of creation and reception, and the virtuality of future developments in the relationship between those acts (*Komunikačné projekty* 95–112). This process is anchored in a corpus of texts available to a community at a given point in time. Within such a corpus, an intricate web of communicative links can be discerned, both synchronically and diachronically, in a way not dissimilar to a historical corpus of human language that displays patterns of semantic and grammatical usage over a period of time.

This paper focuses on a small section in the corpus of Welsh literary tradition, which consists of four medieval tales that have come to be known in English as "The Four Branches of the Mabinogi" and four contemporary novels from Seren's series which bear an explicit textual relationship to the medieval text. Inasmuch as the texts are narrative in nature, relations between the medieval tales and their contemporary counterparts are discussed in terms of narrative features and functions, in order to identify variant and invariant means of expression. Points of contiguity, overlap and divergence, are the loci of intertextual processes which actuate the vehicle of tradition.

"The Four Branches of the Mabinogi" and Seren's "Mabinogion": Titles, Texts and Contexts

The collective title "Mabinogion" is now used as a cover term for the eleven indigenous Welsh prose tales contained in two manuscript compendia, the White Book of Rhydderch (c. 1350) and the Red Book of Hergest (c. 1400). Four of these tales, which their first modern editor Ifor Williams entitled *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (1930), form a textual whole. It appears that the word *mabinogi* used to be a common noun denoting a kind of narrative. Ultimately deriving from *mab*, "a male child", the word seems to have meant "childhood, youth" or "an account of (someone's) youth" as is borne out in another three medieval instances of this rare lexical item (*Geiriadur*).

With childhood clearly thematised in three of the Mabinogi four tales, child and adolescent characters can hardly be considered the main protagonists of the narratives. Rachel Bromwich suggested that the word could have easily developed to mean "stories about descendants" since all the four tales treat of major figures of Welsh tradition and their offspring, namely Pwyll, Rhiannon and Pryderi, the family of Llŷr, and the family of Dôn (102–104). This proposition correlates with the fact that the tales contain echoes of ancient Celtic mythology with a number of character names and motifs having apparent parallels in medieval Irish literature and in the body of fragmented evidence we possess of the culture and spirituality of the pre-Christian Celtic peoples of Britain, Ireland and Continental Europe.

Childhood, adolescence, and the relationship between children, their parents and families, between progenitors and their progeny, feature in each of the four medieval tales and this concern is variously echoed in each of the Mabinogi-based novels. Elements of Celtic Studies relating to the Four

Branches feed into the contemporary Mabinogi-based novels as an additional stratum of reference and meaning.

The most conspicuous structural feature of the Mabinogi is that the text consists of four parts each of which is a stand-alone narrative, referred to as *keinc*. *Keinc* is usually translated as "a branch (of a tree)", hence the Welsh and the English titles, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, "The Four Branches of the Mabinogi". Another meaning of *keinc* is "a strand or yarn of a rope", a tantalising interpretation, which would well describe the Mabinogi's unity of intertwining themes, such as vengeance and atonement for a social transgression, the ramifications of prudent and reckless decision-making and leadership, the supernatural, and the complexities of love relationships and marriage.

While the medieval narrator presents these themes through the lens of underlying Christian ethics, s/he takes care not to preach and consistently situates the stories in the distant past. The skilfulness and unobtrusive morality of his presentation accounts for the resilience of at least some of these themes in the contemporary novels.

Each *keinc* consists of three episodes, each of which, with the exception of the Third Branch, can be construed as a self-contained fabula or narrative whole (Davies, *Crefft* 53–61).[2] To a greater or a lesser degree, the internal structuring of each *keinc* is also reflected in the corresponding contemporary texts. The intricate contraption of theme and structure testifies that the Mabinogi is a complex literary composition by author/s who wove more or less independent strands of native narrative tradition into a vivid tapestry of interlocking plot and character patterns.

Sioned Davies's *Crefft y Cyfarwydd*, "the craft of the story-teller", amply demonstrates that the medieval text subsists on narrative techniques inherited from the preliterate oral practice of medieval Welsh story-tellers. The episodic structure of each *keinc* reflects the temporal exigencies of oral performance and a strict adherence to chronological, logic-driven progression from one event to another by medieval story-tellers. This chronological set-up is in stark contrast to the anachrony of most modern and post-modern narrative fiction with its quicksands of reminiscitory retroversions and foreshadowing anticipations (Bal 66–88), all of which one witnesses in the Mabinogi-based novels of Seren's project.

Another prominent characteristic stemming from the oral and aural narrative aesthetics of medieval Welsh story-telling is the use of formulas, sets of frequently repeated phrases or phraseological structures employed to

express specific ideas. Those include invariable phrases such as greetings and oaths that punctuate passages of direct discourse, among others. A variable formula marks the beginning of narration proper, giving the name and status of the aristocratic protagonist of the tale, the name of his territory and his location at the start of the narrative introduced by an adverbial of time, as in the opening of the Second Branch: "Bendigeidfran son of Llŷr was crowned king over this island and invested with the crown of London. One afternoon he was in Harlech in Ardudwy, at one of his courts" (Davies, The Mabinogion 22).[3]

The titles of the Mabinogi-based novels are less straightforward than the modern nomenclature of the Four Branches, constituting more or less explicit allusions to specific motifs in the novels that only bear a tangential relation to the texts of the Mabinogi. Like many titles of contemporary works of fiction and poetry, the titles of the novels, *The Ninth Wave*, *White Ravens*, *See How They Run*, and *The Meat Tree*, contain intentionally cryptic, metonymic clues to the content of the texts, designed to arouse readers' curiosity.

The title of Russell Celyn Jones's novel *The Ninth Wave* probably reflects a seafaring belief of indeterminate date (Rappoport 25–28) that in a series of waves one is usually notably higher, more powerful and dangerous than all the others. The number varies across different periods and communities all over the globe. The belief has taken root amongst surfers of today. There is a political novel of the same title as Jones's by Eugene Burdick, in which the ninth wave motif appears in a surfing context (Laderman 43). In Jones's novel, unlike the First Branch it retells, the sea is an important location charged with figurative meaning and the motif of the awe-inspiring ninth wave is implicit in one of the final scenes of the novel describing a nearly fatal accident when Pwyll takes his son Pryderi, with whom he has just been reunited, on a surfing trip.

Owen Sheers's *White Ravens* echoes the name of the Third Branch's tragic heroine Branwen whose name translates as "white crow or raven". The phrase has literal and metaphorical connotations. A white raven is a biological anomaly, afforded meagre chances of survival. A Welsh proverb *Gwyn y gwęl y frân ei chyw* (literally, the crow sees its chick as white) translates as the English *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. Activated in a dialogue between two of the novel's main characters (Sheers 128–129), both meanings are present in the novel's portrayal of love and family relationships.

The title of Lloyd Jones's novel *See How They Run* is a quote from the nursery-rhyme "Three Blind Mice". The content and tempo of the song are humorously

evocative of the violent scurry and scrummage of rugby matches that form the novel's narrative background and of the Third Branch's protagonist Manawydan's skirmish with a horde of mice that destroy his fields of corn.

The title of *The Meat Tree* by Gwyneth Lewis refers to a predatory alien being, who combines human, animal and plant genomes and whom the novel's two characters encounter on their mission as they search for space-ship wrecks out in the orbit of Mars. As Gwyneth Lewis informs us, the image of "the meat tree" refers to a specific experience she had when she saw "a certain tree one autumn" in America and "the only way [she] had to describe the incandescent fall of its leaves was to say it was Lleu, an eagle perched in the branches and dropping his bright flesh into the dirt" (249). The image refers to a scene in the Fourth Branch, when sorcerer Gwydion discovers Lleu in the form of a wounded eagle atop an oak tree shedding its worm-riddled, rotting flesh.

In addition to its informative, background-forming function, the medieval formula reflects the prime importance of place. Locations would have constituted an immediate link between the once-upon-a-time temporal frame of the narrative fiction and the medieval audience's reality. This referential, focalising function of place, place-names and their cultural and literary connotations, is reproduced with great narrative relevance in the contemporary novels, as shown below.

A major difference between the Mabinogi and the novels lies in the deployment of direct discourse. Whereas direct discourse makes up about 40% of each of the Four Branches and constitutes a major, if not the main, medium of character portrayal in the whole text (Davies, *Crefft* 197–209), characterisation in the novels is frequently achieved by means of what the narratologist Mieke Bal calls free indirect discourse. Free indirect discourse oscillates between the external, omniscient, narrator and character-bound narration (Bal 44–51, 117–118). It goes without saying that such ambiguity of narrative voices is never encountered in the text of the Mabinogi, which never leaves the reader/hearer at a loss as to who is speaking (Davies, *Crefft* 228). While the Mabinogi's external narrator is always clearly recognisable even as it appears to yield the narration to characters in dialogues, Seren's Mabinogi-based novels exhibit frequently ambiguous levels of narration.

The ambiguity of narrative voice can be quite inconspicuous as in Owen Sheers's *White Ravens*. There, the external narrator's voice is woven as much into the character of Rhian, a member of a Welsh sheep-farming family scraping a dodgy livelihood in the wake of the 2001 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, as into the narration of a WW2 veteran whose story transposes

the action of the Second Branch's dynastic warfare and internecine feuds into a tragedy of family breakdown ultimately caused by brutal transpersonal forces of global history. These two lines of narration combine internal (character-bound) and external narrative presentation and appear to develop the Second Branch's story-within-a-story scheme. The scheme is used in the first episode of the branch when the British king Bendigeidfran and his brother-in-law, the Irish king Matholwch, converse about the origin of the cauldron of rebirth, Bendigeidfran's gift to Matholwch. The content of this seemingly casual dialogue has far-reaching repercussions in the ensuing narrative of the Second Branch, which describes the conflict between the British and the Irish and its aftermath. Despite their different deployment of narrative voices, the Second Branch and *White Ravens* concatenate apparently independent fabulas to describe the logic-defying, cataclysmic ramifications of violence-induced cycles of trauma.

Gwyneth Lewis's *The Meat Tree*, on the other hand, offers a deceptively orderly, screenplay-like distribution of two character-bound narrators, the inspector of space wrecks and his apprentice. However, the two characters assume several different personae as they enter a drifting spaceship and activate its VR program based on the narrative of the Fourth Branch. The resulting multiplicity of morphing characters within two narrating agents is reflective of the numerous individual, social and biological metamorphoses of the Fourth Branch.

The Branches and the Novels: Prototexts and Metatexts

In his theory of communication, which outlines the functions and mechanisms of tradition, Anton Popovič introduces the terms of prototext and metatext. Prototexts are texts that have been utilised in other texts, metatexts. Metatexts can come into being fairly soon after the emergence of the prototext or after a considerable lapse of time since the prototext's appearance. The most straightforward example of this relation is translation where the highest possible degree of equivalence between the source and target texts is usually maintained. Other works such as literary parodies or indeed the novels of Seren's series represent a much more complex spectrum of textual invariables and variables, elements of the prototext which the metatext absorbs with minimal semantic and structural changes, on the one hand, and those which are, on the other hand, dramatically manipulated, warped or even deleted in

the metatext (Popovič, Aspects 225–235). Some, if not all, texts derive directly or indirectly from other pre-existing texts; the prototext-metatext scheme is a spectrum of intertextual relationships of varying density and scope.

Each branch of the Mabinogi is itself a complex metatext, stemming from lost written, oral and aural narrative materials. While the Mabinogi's prototexts are ultimately irrecoverable, there are more or less obvious traces of related narrative content in the Triads of the Island of Britain and in early and high medieval Welsh poetry.[4] Seren's Mabinogi-based novels are likewise densely intertextual. They can be regarded as metatexts that encapsulate some of the semantic possibilities intrinsic to the medieval tales.

The relationship between the Four Branches and the novels can also be described in narratological terms. A narrative text, like any other text, consists of linguistic signs or tokens. Some of those tokens are more narratively relevant than others and can be classified as narrative types. Similar to syntactic categories, narrative types include subjects, objects, events and locations, elements that constitute a narrative text's fabula.[5] If there is a co-occurrence of narrative types between the syntax of a narrative text's fabula and that of another narrative text, it signifies a prototext-metatext relationship between the two narrative texts. A simple example of such a co-occurrence between the First Branch and the novel *The Ninth Wave* could be represented as narrative type-subject (Pwyll/Prince) and narrative type: (Dyfed/South-West Wales) location. Such co-occurrences of narrative types form structural nodes of cognition that influence our reading of the metatext by referring us back to its prototext. The following paragraphs outline some textual and narrative elements, structures and motifs which relate the metatexts of the Mabinogi-based novels to their prototexts in the Four Branches of the Mabinogi.

The Ninth Wave by Russell Celyn Jones bears a close textual relationship to the original *keinc*. The texts share many elements of plot action and structure, an overarching external narrator, character names, a general location in South-West Wales and a significant reliance on dialogue as a means of character portrayal. The First Branch consists of three self-contained episodes of similar length, which the novel reproduces with comparatively minor adjustments in four chapters of about 30 to 40 pages each.[6] The third episode of the branch contains the following narrative types: event – the birth of Pwyll and Rhiannon's son, his supernatural kidnapping, his fosterage by Pwyll's vassal Teyrnon and his wife, and his reunion with his parents. These are extended over two chapters in Russel Celyn Jones's novel. This extension seems to reflect

a contemporary preoccupation with the emotional turmoil of child loss and the extreme vulnerability of children and adolescents in the wake of social and economic cataclysms.

The novel envisages a dystopian world in which depletion of fossil fuels has led to the refeudalisation of societies and large-scale movement of populations clashing over territory and means of subsistence. The Four Branches often convey such harsh phenomena of reality by pitching their characters against formidable supernatural forces. The First Branch contains hints of endemic warfare, an unequal position of women in a patriarchal social order and child destitution and mortality. All of these appear to be set within a supernatural context in the medieval tale. The themes are reinstated in the novel's world of a not-too-distant future.

Along with the structural symmetry of the medieval narrative, *The Ninth Wave* shares its narrative location in South-West Wales. However, Annwfn, the otherworldly realm, which lies outside the bounds of the quotidian human existence and yet is a specific location in the fictional world of the medieval tale, is euhemerised in the novel as an unspecified territory wrangled over by two local nabobs, Arawn and Havgan, who bear the same names as the two otherworldly adversaries in the First Branch of the Mabinogi.

The Mabinogi's narrator sets its scenes by relying on its audience's knowledge of local topography, activated by the referential capacity of place-names, sometimes reinforced by onomastic comments linking a place-name's meaning to the story's action. Analogously, Russell Celyn Jones conjures recognisable locales of South-Walian land- and city-scapes by means of suggestive descriptions, frequently withdrawing the name of the location from the reader, as he does in his captivating evocation of a dilapidated, crime-ridden Swansea.[7]

The descriptions are sometimes punctuated with covert references to the cultural and literary heritage of Wales. For example, Pwyll rides on horseback through the streets of Swansea to confront Gwawl, his rival for the hand of the beautiful Rhiannon. Gwawl is the First Branch's sinister otherworldly suitor, recast in the novel as a local mob boss governing Swansea. Pwyll is said to go "past ruins and boys in their ruin", an ingenious allusion to the poem "I see the boys of summer" by the Swansea-born *enfant terrible* of Modernist poetry, Dylan Marlais Thomas (1–2). The poem deals, among other things, with the ephemerality of youth, echoing the novel's concern with the psychological and physical fragility of childhood and adolescence.

While Russell Celyn Jones generally tends to expand the highly economical style and phraseology of the medieval tale, he occasionally appears to retain the formulaic suggestiveness of the medieval text, as in this vignette:

"The First Branch of the Mabinogi"	*The Ninth Wave*
And as they were sitting, they could see a woman wearing a shining golden garment of brocaded silk on a big, tall, pale-white horse coming along the highway that ran past the mound. (Davies, The Mabinogion 8)	Something else, someone caught his eye. A woman was leading her horse down on the shore, her orange cotton shift like fire burning oxygen out of the air. (R. C. Jones 60)

The passages describe the first time Pwyll sees his future wife Rhiannon. The medieval narrator conveys the sumptuous wonder of Rhiannon's appearance by an exceptionally lavish series of vividly colourful adjectives deployed within the established pattern of an inherited formula for description. Russell Celyn Jones frames the numinous vision in a tight conceit capturing the lambent chromaticity of the original in a striking comparison resembling a scientific observation.

Owen Sheers's novel *White Ravens* also reflects many structural and narrative-type elements of the Second Branch, albeit in a much more oblique way than Russell Celyn Jones's retelling of the First Branch. The novel mirrors the story-within-a-story structural frame which the medieval narrative deploys in direct discourse between two major characters. The tale of the cauldron of rebirth, presented in dialogue between the British king Bendigeidfran and the Irish king Matholwch in the first episode of the Second Branch, acquires immediate relevance in the second episode of the *keinc*. Mirroring the story of the Second Branch, the story of the WW2 Irish veteran Matthew O'Connell is presented in direct discourse (partly in dialogue, but mostly in monologue) and is so fashioned as to have a direct bearing on the frame story of the young Welsh woman Rhian.

Once again, locations are of profound importance in the novel and in the medieval tale and geographical correspondences are indicative of their prototext-metatext relationship. The novel's beginning is set where the main narrative of the Second Branch ends, in London, specifically at the Tower. Scholars identify the adjacent Tower Hill with the Gwynfryn, literally the White Hill, where the seven survivors of the disastrous British expedition to Ireland bury the head of their chieftain Bendigeidfran, facing France as a

magic talisman which is to protect the island from future invaders (Hughes, Bendigeiduran 64). In Owen Sheers's novel, this Welsh mytheme is ingeniously replaced with an English legend about the ravens of the Tower of London, which holds that the kingdom of Britain will fall if the birds ever leave the site. This popular belief of uncertain date seems to have gained a special poignancy (and most probably emerged in this form) during the German Blitz of British cities in the Second World War (Sax 81–82).

The protagonist of Sheers's novel, Matthew O'Connell, is an Irish volunteer in the British war effort. Employed by the War Office's propaganda department after sustaining a crippling injury in action, he is tasked by secret order of the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, with replenishing the Tower's dwindled unkindness of ravens from a backwater farm in Wales. A ravenless Tower could be used by Nazi propaganda to further undermine Britain's war-weary morale. Accordingly, Matthew travels to Wales to retrieve six raven chicks nurtured by a good-natured giant son of the soil, Bendigeidfran Llewellyn, aka Ben. While waiting for the birds to grow enough to be ready for transport, Matthew falls in love with Ben's sister Branwen.

It is at this junction that the novel takes up the fabula of the Second Branch, transforming narrative type elements of the medieval text's characters, objects and events in a richly suggestive matrix of correspondence. As in *The Ninth Wave*, the most obvious articles of correspondence are personal names which are either the same as the medieval characters' or echo them in phonetically similar contemporary names. The character of Matthew is modelled on Matholwch, the king of Ireland. A foil to the strong and considerate character of the British king Bendigeidfran, the Irish overlord is in perpetual awe and thrall of his subjects, sacrificing relationships to accommodate the vagaries of public opinion. Similarly, after relocating to Wicklow to farm his father's land, Matthew gradually becomes cruelly neglectful of his wife Branwen, as he gives in to the gossip-mongering claustrophobia of a rural Irish community that is suspicious of this native returned from fighting a war for Ireland's archenemy, with an outlandish belle, to boot.

Owen Sheers's Branwen closely traces the contours of her medieval namesake, the tragic heroine of the Second Branch, one of the Three Chief Maidens of the Island of Britain who is, quite possibly, one of the earliest psychologically robust representations in a European vernacular literature of what is nowadays known as battered woman syndrome (Walker 49–53, 339–341). Both characters are young wives and mothers mistreated by their husbands and victimised by the communities they come to live in. Far from

being passive victims, they are constantly frustrated in their resourceful attempts at resolving crises and conciliating the conflicts in which they become implicated without having any real part in causing them.

The concurrence of violence and mental affliction and/or impairment is a pronounced theme in the Second Branch, analysable in terms of narrative tokens and types: subjects and events. The theme is reflected in the character of Branwen, in the supernatural recuperative retreats of the seven survivors of the internecine carnage in Ireland and in the dark antagonistic figure of Bendigeidfran and Branwen's half-brother Efnysien.

Efnysien is a startling representation of a psychopathic individual who instigates the conflict of the Second Branch. Owen Sheers recasts Efnysien as Ben and Branwen's brother Evan, who returns home from war, presumably suffering from a form of PTSD. Infuriated by Branwen's marriage to Matthew, "a neutral bloody Irishman" (Sheers 135), Evan mutilates his brother-in-law's horse. The scene echoes the Second Branch's harrowingly graphic description of the disfigurement of Matholwch's stud by Efnysien. The mutilation of a horse by Efnysien/Evan is another instance of co-occurrence of narrative types: event, object and subject, in the prototextual tale and in the metatextual novel.

Links between a metatext and a prototext can be implicit or explicit. Linguistic tokens relatable to narrative types, such as locations, are indicative of an implicit prototext-metatext relationship. An example of an explicit link between a text and its prototext is the book, given to Matthew by Ben Llewellyn, containing an English translation of the Mabinogion. In the novel, the book is a source of sustained dramatic irony, an instance of a meta-narrative reference. Allusions to the book's content explicitly index the Second Branch. Furthermore, Ben's gift of the book mirrors the narrative-type: object (gift) of the cauldron of rebirth given by Bendigeidfran to Matholwch to compensate for the insult and damage wrought by Efnysien.

The book is a textual bridge between the novel and the medieval tale and between the novel's two strands of narrative that appear to be independent of each other until the very last paragraph. This multilevel linking is encapsulated in the last sentence of the novel, "Be a bridge" (Sheers 180). This is addressed by the narrator of Matthew's story, who turns out to be Matthew himself, to Rhian, his grand-daughter, who left her two brothers stranded in the middle of London after seeing the gruesome innards of their sheep-rustling lorry enterprise. The sentence is an explicit allusion to the Welsh proverb *A fo ben bid bont*, "who is a leader (literally, 'a head'), let him be a bridge", spoken and

enacted by the giant king Bendigeidfran in the Second Branch. The saying encodes one of the central moral concerns of the medieval text and the novel, which is how to use personal power and potential in critical situations with minimum harm to others.

Narrative type co-occurrences and meta-narrative intertextual references also play an important structural role in Lloyd Jones's *See How They Run*. The title encompasses a pool of meanings and connotations of the word "mouse" implicit in the nursery-rhyme "Three Blind Mice" and in the final episode of the Third Branch of the Mabinogi. The tiny rodent is one of the tokens of this narrative type: (mouse) object (L. Jones 207–210). Like other narrative elements of the Third Branch, the novel elaborates those murine associations by integrating them into highly diverse intertextual references and sustained metonymic wordplay. The plague of mice is the final of a series of narrative type: events – three successive attempts by the Third Branch's antagonist Llwyd son of Cil Coed to destroy Manawydan and his family. Llwyd fab Cil Coed's persecution of Manawydan in the Third Branch is tantamount to the digital spoliation that the novel's antihero, an ambitious academic, Dr Llwyd McNamara, wreaks with the click of a mouse on a rival historian's *Nachlass*, a biography of a Welsh rugby star, Dylan Manawydan Jones, aka Big M.

The novel recasts Manawydan and Pryderi, two of the seven men who survived the Pyrrhic victory of the British over the Irish in the Second Branch, as players of a Welsh rugby team whose stellar performance in international championships is eclipsed by the tragic death of their captain at the end of a finals match between Wales and Ireland. Lloyd Jones's text thus reflects a major structural feature of the Third Branch, one of several formal peculiarities that distinguish the tale from the other three branches of the Mabinogi. Lacking the typical introductory formula, the Third Branch's opening displays immediate narrative continuity with the final episode of the Second Branch that describes the aftermath of the British-Irish conflict.

On the one hand, the heroic action of the Second Branch is tragicomically subsumed in the arguably no less epic drama of international rugby matches. The antiheroic narrative thrust of the Third Branch, on the other hand, is conveyed by reimagining the two main subjects of the medieval text's fabula accordingly. Manawydan, a doughty warlord turned cautious pacifist, who always treads the path of least resistance in the face of hardship, becomes a retired rugby champion, who, having likewise seen his share of trouble, struggles to find his place in the world. Manawydan's insidious adversary Llwyd, who orchestrates a belated vendetta against Manawydan's wife and

son-in-law, becomes a Celtic Studies scholar specialising in the history of Celtic sports, who engages in a senseless academic batrachomyomachia, ultimately developing into a vindictive quest to destroy the very subject of his research. Mirroring the vengeful sorcerer of the Third Branch, the character of the petty-minded academic Llwyd McNamara, aka Lou, constantly merges with the novel's external narrator's voice, which reflects yet another structural peculiarity of the Third Branch.

Unlike the other three tales, the Third Branch's three episodes are not self-contained. The Third Branch rather appears to constitute one fabula, a narrative whole of consecutive events. The internal narrative logic of the tale is fully dependent upon the actions of Llwyd son of Cil Coed whose motives and identity, like those of a wrongdoer in a whodunnit mystery, are only revealed at the very end of the branch. Reflecting this structural rationale, the novel flips the narrative focus, which in the Third Branch lies with the noble forbearing protagonist Manawydan, centring the narration in the character of the clandestine, truculent antagonist.

By the same token, the novel's two prototexts, the Second and the Third Branch, coalesce in Llwyd McNamara's reading of his deceased rival's oeuvre. Llwyd's predatory response to the *Nachlass* that the late Dr Feeney bequeaths to him satirises the pettiness of scholarly disputes and the general tendency of scholars to vivisect the ever-elusive subject of their research to the point of infinitesimally obscure minutiae.

Lloyd Jones's retelling of the Third Branch makes use of cultural associations which seeped through from Celtic scholarship into more general awareness and which, with all probability, did not feature at all in the medieval receptions of the narrative text. For example, the Welsh Manawydan fab Llŷr has been linked to Manannán mac Lir, a sea god of Irish legend associated with the Isle of Man. Apart from the name itself, there is virtually no trace of Manawydan being linked to the sea in either the texts of the Mabinogi or anywhere else in Middle Welsh literature. However, aware of this arguably quite ancient scholarly reconstruction that posits a common Insular Celtic sea deity, Lloyd Jones makes explicit allusions to the Irish myth and associates his Manawydan-based character with the sea, Ireland and the Isle of Man (63, 219). Lloyd Jones's novel makes extensive use of secondary texts spawned by academic scholarship dealing with the Four Branches. His use of those secondary texts oscillates between serious semiotic engagement and tongue-in-cheek humour.

The novel's cornucopia of literary, cultural and scholarly allusions is noticeable as much in character portrayal as in its treatment of place, especially in its textually rich evocation of Ireland which includes references as wide-ranging as the Ulster Cycle, Gerald of Wales's topographical treatises, trellis shamrock crockery and Irish traditional and pop music. The referential density of Ireland is in stark contrast to the novel's treatment of Wales and England, the two general locations of the Third Branch. Overall, Wales is depicted as a depopulated and economically deprived rural territory. Despite its natural riches and beauty, the land is perpetually shrouded in mist, and is left unreferenced, apart from a few references to the topography of the Mabinogi prototexts. This referential paucity also pertains to the novel's treatment of England, whose rich towns only feature as a setting for the retired Welsh rugby star's failed business ventures. The Third Branch's geographical make-up and its major theme, the opposition between a place as a sociocultural entity and the ruination of it, which the tale portrays as resulting from a preternatural disappearance of its populace, is thus imaginatively reinstated in the contemporary narrative. The novel reinterprets this central motif as the actual economic imbalance between the two UK countries and leaves the two geographical entities empty of any other meaning beyond their contrasting economic conditions.

The gravity of Lloyd Jones's political purport is counterpointed by omnipresent textual humour. One of the sources of this humour is metatextual parody of the Mabinogi's aristocratic milieu. The parody is most evident in the contrast between the stylistically elevated discourse of the Third Branch's characters and the highly colloquial vernacular of their contemporary counterparts. This metatextual aspect amounts to sustained humorous bathos, as in this speech by Pryderi, which is textually directly related to the dialogue between Pryderi and his grief-stricken companion Manawydan at the beginning of the Third Branch:

> Big M me ole pal, you've been a good friend to me these many years. I came into the side a pup, wet behind the ears, but you looked after me and now it's payback time. I'm going back to the wife, I'm packing up this mad maul of life, I'm going back to where I belong, to the high cliffs of West Wales. Hotel Corvo, and my lovely jubbly wifey. Coming, mate? We could have a fine old time running the joint together. Seven bars and a hundred rooms, plenty of fun to be had; you can run the bars and I'll

> run the hotel side with the missus. And there's me ole mum, Rhiannon, she could do with a bit of company, know what I mean? So how about it me sweet palaroony, get yer dancin' shoes, let's head out to the place where I love best, let's watch the sun go down on an empty sea, let's smoke some decent hash, play some music, chill… (L. Jones 57–58)

Compare this to the content and register of the relevant passage from the Third Branch:

> 'Will you take any other advice?' said Pryderi. 'I need it,' he said, 'and what advice is that?' 'The seven cantrefs of Dyfed were left to me,' said Pryderi, 'and Rhiannon, my mother, lives there. Although it may be the only realm you have, there are no better seven cantrefs. My wife is Cigfa, daughter of Gwyn Gloyw,' he said. 'And although the realm will be mine in name, let the benefits be yours and Rhiannon's. And if you ever wanted a realm of your own, perhaps you could take that one.' 'I never wanted one, lord,' he said, 'but may God repay you your friendship.' 'The best friendship I can give shall be yours, if you want it.' 'I do, friend,' he said. 'May God repay you. And I shall go with you to visit Rhiannon and the realm.' 'You are doing the right thing,' he said. 'I am sure that you have never heard a woman converse better than Rhiannon. When she was in her prime, there was no woman more beautiful, and even now you will not be disappointed with her looks.' (Davies, The Mabinogion 35–36)

The treatment of the Fourth Branch in *The Meat Tree* by Gwyneth Lewis is largely meta-narrative. Not dissimilar to the book meta-narrative in Owen Sheers's *White Ravens*, the novel's characters explicitly re-enact most of the action of the branch. However, unlike the old man's tale of *White Ravens*, the characters are presented as having insight, however fragmentary, into the narrative they re-enact, and continuously comment on their experience of it, in a way which could be compared to a simultaneous recording of a living person's ratiocinating reading of the medieval tale. In terms of structure, the novel closely follows the fairly clearly defined episodes and sub-episodes of the medieval text.

Chapter 4 corresponds to the first sub-episode of the first episode of the branch, telling of Gwydion's ploy to help his hopelessly enamoured brother Gilfaethwy carry through his lustful intentions on Goewin, the virgin maid of their uncle and lord of Gwynedd. As in *White Ravens*, Gwyneth Lewis's

novel contains sustained dramatic irony. While the two characters, Campion, the Inspector of Wrecks, and Nona, his Apprentice, come from a human colony on Mars, the implication is that their knowledge of the culture of the old defunct Earth consists of extensive, and yet vastly fragmented, heritage. As the two astronauts enter an innocuously looking, abandoned earth vessel adrift in the orbit of Mars, they little know what is in store for them. On board the ship, they discover a VR system and hardware, which they hope might provide them with clues to the fate of the missing crew. While neither Campion nor Nona appear to have an inkling of what the VR narrative is based on, they both, especially Campion, seem to have quite an extensive awareness of the mythological underpinning of the fictional world of the tale. Portions of Campion's commentary resemble certain modern interpretations of the branch and similar texts by modern scholars (Lewis 39–43).

The passages recording Nona and Campion's reactions to experiencing the destinies of the Fourth Branch's characters could be analysed as tokens of the narrative types: subjects and events. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 correspond to the second sub-episode of the first episode of the branch, recounting the threefold punishment that Math inflicts on Gwydion and Gilfaethwy for raping his maid Goewin and deceitfully leading him into a costly war with Pryderi, the lord of Dyfed, who dies in the conflict at the hands of Gwydion. Math turns them into deer, wild boars and wolves and the two brothers are compelled to live and mate with each other in the forest and produce offspring each time. Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11 correspond to 4 sub-episodes of the second episode of the branch.[8] The episode tells of Gwydion's proposal to Math to make his sister Aranrhod his new maid, her public humiliation, the three *tynghet* or fates that the humiliated Aranrhod puts on Lleu, and the resolution of these fates by Gwydion and Math. Finally, Chapters 12 and 13 correspond to the third and last episode of the Fourth Branch, telling of Lleu's wife Blodeuedd's betrayal, his nearly fatal injury at the hands of her lover, and the retribution exacted by Lleu, Math and Gwydion upon Blodeuedd and her paramour.

The first three chapters of the novel introduce its two characters, establishing the narrative background. This background consists of a well-known science fiction topos, famously employed in *Alien* (1979) by Ridley Scott, for example. The topos, which constitutes a fabula scheme, an abandoned space-ship harbouring a dangerous organism (*Alien* 00:11:19-36:16), is developed into a frame-story in Gwyneth Lewis's novel, depicting a routine investigation of derelict vessels and space debris in the orbit of Mars. As in *Alien* (00:36:17-01:53:19), the mission turns into a life-and-death struggle. The ship turns

out to be a sentient alien being who feeds on minds and bodies, attracting unsuspecting space explorers by engaging their curiosity and imagination. The alien being is an amalgam of the Fourth Branch's characters' metamorphoses, those of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy turning from human into three different animal species in the first episode, and those of Blodeuedd, a woman conjured out of flowers and later turned into an owl, and of Lleu, a strange embryo turned human, then a bird of prey and finally human again.

Between the first three branches and the corresponding novels, prototext-metatext links can be described in terms of narratively relevant tokens and narrative types. In *The Meat Tree*, the external narrator's discourse is minimised to textual notes, and the prototext-metatext links are realised in character-bound discourse. The textual notes consist of chapter titles and marginalia identifying the time and speakers and resemble the stage-directions of a drama, or indeed the subtitles in many science fiction films (*Alien* 00:02:07). The chapter titles and time notes provide the narrative with clear sequential ordering, which is somewhat reminiscent of the Mabinogi narratives' consistent reliance on sequential chronology and direct discourse character tags.

Up until Campion and Nona's transformation into Lleu and Blodeuwedd[9], their character-bound narration is realised in two distinct forms, the Synapse Log and the Joint Thought Channel. Both function via neuro-implants that are routinely installed in Martians. While the Synapse Log is represented as a linguistic translation of the individual character's thoughts and feelings, the Joint Thought Channel is a kind of mind-melding device, recording the telepathic conversations between Campion and Nona. This orderly duality of narration collapses once Nona and Campion have been absorbed into the Mabinogi characters of Blodeuwedd and Lleu, assimilated and consumed by the alien being. At this point, the complex intertextuality of the text intensifies (Lewis 42).

Nona assumes the nature of a plant, a member of the biological kingdom, from which Blodeuedd of the Fourth Branch hails. Campion assumes the identity of Lleu, who is a passive, flat character whose function is more that of an object acted upon by the other characters rather than an acting subject in the medieval fabula. Nona and Campion's metamorphoses are described by means of language and motifs used in other texts, both scholarly and fictional, as cited by Gwyneth Lewis in her Afterword (249–256). The intertextual plethora seems to stand for what is usually referred to as tradition, imagining, re-imagining and reworking texts of various media. This process is implicitly

thematised in the novel, e.g., in this piece of dialogue between Nona and Campion towards the end:

> *She*
> So the ship could travel on infinitely through the universe, incorporating other minds into itself where it found them?
> *He*
> Lured in by our curiosity and then by our love of a story. And all the time the ship was drawing life for itself from our explorations. Like a sundew. And that's how we've been caught.
> (232)

The passage envisages imagination, "our love of a story", as the ultimate source of all texts of any genre and any medium, the driving force of tradition.

Focusing on the narrative-type: (supernatural) event in the Fourth Branch and in *The Meat Tree*, one finds that unlike the other three novels, the magical elements of the Fourth Branch are neither neutralised nor completely euhemerised in Gwyneth Lewis's novel. Lewis thus appears to embrace one of Arthur C. Clarke's three maxims that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (Clarke 36). Her text subsists in science as much as in art, in the medieval prototext as much as in an abundance of other texts based in contemporary culture. As a story-teller, Gwyneth Lewis comes close to what might have been the original, or at least one of the historical, meanings of the Welsh word *cyfarwydd*, a person versed in all kinds of knowledge essential to their community.

One such piece of contemporary lore is metaphorically exploited by Gwyneth Lewis, encapsulated as it is in the name Lleu, an old word for "light", a meaning of the proper name that the author is aware of (Lewis 245). Unlike Blodeuedd, the character of Lleu returns from his metamorphosis to being human, just like Campion does, when he, unlike Nona, manages to escape from the predatory ship. Lleu is the vehicle of narration in both the novel and in the medieval narrative text, and by extension, of the acts of communication, embodied in the two texts and the innumerable prototexts that the Fourth Branch and the novel incorporate and exploit. Any text is encoded information and imagination, "as ubiquitous as light" (Lewis 231).

Conclusion

Many works by Welsh authors, some written in Welsh and English at the same time, exhibit a wealth of linguistic and cultural interchange, including works like David Jones's modernist epic *In Parenthesis* (1937) and Gwyneth Lewis's *Y Llofrudd Iaith* (1999), or *Keeping Mum* (2003) in English, for example. Reading contemporary texts based on previous texts has wide-ranging implications for the study and understanding of both old and recent texts that collectively form what may be called the cerebellum of culture. The deployment of the Mabinogi texts in the four contemporary novels does not only consist in the "ludic pleasure" of reimagining the language and motifs of the medieval tales (Sheers 195). The medieval narrative texts inform the corresponding novels structurally and thematically, and the transfer of narrative content affords an approximation of what constitutes textual tradition.

To paraphrase Roland Barthes's famous adage, which, in turn, paraphrases the Evangelists Mark and Luke, even the simplest of texts, in any medium, says: "My name is legion" (Barthes 60). One has to carefully handle several Occam's razors to attend to the demoniac word horde of meanings. The tools chosen in this article consist of a structuralist theory of communication and structuralist narratology.

Endnotes

1. Compare "The Four Branches Flowering: New Tales from the 'Mabinogion'" by Matthieu Boyd (2015). Boyd's approach to the texts under review is largely different to that employed in this paper. Immense thanks are due to Dr Simon Rodway of Aberystwyth University who proof-read the paper and greatly improved it with many valuable insights.
2. A fabula only exists in the abstract as "a series of logically and chronologically related events" underlying a narrative text (Bal 5). In this context, an episode can usually be analysed as a minimum fabula whose events unfold towards a logical coda. Sioned Davies has shown that the narrative texts of the First, the Second and the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi contain three such series of events, three fabulas that are combined into one major fabula with a final denouement.
3. This introductory formula, which opens each *keinc*, except the third, informs the titles of modern scholarly editions and translations of the four tales: *Pwyll Pendeuic Dyuet* ("Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed"), *Bendigeiduran uab Llyr* ("Bendigeidfran son of Llŷr"), *Manawydan uab Llyr* ("Manawydan son of Llŷr"), and *Math uab Mathonwy* ("Math son of Mathonwy").
4. Ian Hughes has collated references to characters appearing in the Mabinogi from the Triads, medieval poetry and other available comparative evidence of medieval date (Math viii-xxxxviii; Manawydan xiv-xxxv; Bendigeiduran: xxi-li).

5. The terms *token* and *type* are borrowed from corpus linguistics. Narratively relevant tokens can consist of single words, clauses or bigger chunks of text that can be related to one of the categories of narrative types. The narrative types: subject, object, event, location, are based on Mieke Bal's categories describing the elements of a fabula (154–187).
6. Sioned Davies's divisions of the branches into episodes are followed here throughout, unless otherwise stated (*Crefft* 53–61).
7. Similar to the Mabinogi's nominal references to specific locations, the novel makes references to real locales (R. C. Jones 24, 77–83, 127).
8. Sioned Davies places the boundary between the first and the second episode of the branch differently, including the trial of Aranrhod for the post of the foot-holder in the first episode (*Crefft* 58).
9. Blodeuedd is the name given to the woman created by Math and Gwydion out of the flowers of oak, broom and meadow-sweet on her baptism. However, when she is punished by Gwydion for disgracing her husband, she is turned into an owl, to be despised by all the other birds and called Blodeuwedd "flower-faced" for ever after. In an onomastic story, the narrator claims that *blodeuwedd* is a word synonymous with *tylluan* "an owl" used in the speech of his/her day, probably on account of an implied similarity of an owl's face to flowers in bloom, as it indeed is in certain species like the barn owl, for example. Gwyneth Lewis uses the form Blodeuwedd throughout, since this is the name she grew up with, she informs us in her textual notes at the end of the volume (256).

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