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Christian Influences On *The Mabinogi*

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The *Mabinogion*, specifically the Four Branches of *The Mabinogi*, is almost universally considered a sophisticated work of literature. As they would do for any well-developed work of art, critics analyze the Four Branches looking for themes and author-intended morals. These themes and morals, in turn, are developed mainly by parallels between and within Branches. Modern critical interpretations of *The Mabinogi* have emphasized themes arising from the well of Welsh mythology. However, certain similarities strongly suggest that the Christian narrative
dramatically influenced the redactor of *The Mabinogi*: parallels between Christ and various noble characters in the Welsh tales; a counter-cultural insistence upon the undesirability of violence; and a reverent treatment of the Otherworld all bespeak the Christian concerns of the redactor.

Catherine McKenna has remarked of the First Branch, Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, that it portrays a king coming to sovereignty and a king coming to wisdom. Both of these interpretations merit credence; however, a complete appreciation of these theories will include an appreciation of the similarity between *The Mabinogi* and *Beowulf* inasmuch as both seek to reconcile their cultural heritages with the new Christian religion. As J.R.R. Tolkien suggests of *Beowulf*, two contradictory influences play into *The Mabinogi*: “both new faith and new learning…and also a body of native tradition…for the changed mind to contemplate together” (71). The redactor of the Welsh tales, like the *Beowulf* poet, fully participates in neither the new Roman faith and learning nor the old Celtic tradition, “feeling [their worths] more poetically because he was himself removed” (73). That is, the redactor straddled the boundary between old and new, his proximity to each allowing him to appreciate their interplay, but his separation from each allowing him to view them with poetic nostalgia. Siewers also suggests this, calling the Four Branches “filled with both ancestral wisdom and ancient [C]hristian precedence” (196). Thus, although the Christian influences upon *The Mabinogi* are substantially demonstrated, this body of evidence will not in the least
lessen the importance to the text of the Welsh mythology noted by other scholars.

McKenna traces the mythological roots of Rhiannon, the magical wife of the First Branch’s protagonist, thus providing perhaps the most substantial support for the view that Pwyll is meant to recount a ruler’s rise to sovereignty. As the sovereignty goddess, Rhiannon is one “whose hand must be won by any aspirant to kingship.” Not only her “equine associations” but also “her supernatural power, her independent strong-mindedness in choosing a husband, and her superior wisdom” link her to other sovereignty goddesses, “such as the Irish Medb” (317). McKenna supports her argument soundly and convincingly; however, she overlooks other implications these allusions to a goddess may have had to a medieval Welsh audience. Rhiannon’s roots may be in Celtic mythology, but in the full bloom of *The Mabinogi*, her qualities also hearken to Christ.

The parallels between Rhiannon and Christ begin with the former’s first appearance in the story. When the main character, Pwyll, first sees Rhiannon, he beholds a creature clearly Otherworldly, if not divine. Thus, Rhiannon’s choosing to travel from her Otherworld home to Pwyll’s dominion makes her analogous to Christ, who alone “descended from heaven” (John 3:13). The fact that Rhiannon comes from the Otherworld to bestow sovereignty on Pwyll specifically by marriage strengthens this parallel. Similarly, Christ came to earth to restore man, “by the washing of water with the word” in order to make the Church, the Bride of Christ, “holy and blameless” (Eph.
Thus, Christ’s marriage to the Church gives men the ability to be “born again” (John 3:3) and to be made “sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26). Rhiannon’s wisdom also reminds one of Christ. When Pwyll foolishly offers to give anything to his disguised rival suitor Gwawl, Rhiannon takes the blunder in stride. She accepts Pwyll’s foolish decision but proceeds to outwit Gwawl, beating him at his own game, so to speak. Thus, Pwyll gains the sovereignty goddess not through battle but by unexpected means, becoming for a time a lowly beggar (McKenna 316). Christ employed similar tactics in that He redeemed mankind by unexpected means. Instead of through battle, as Peter would have preferred, Christ saved His creation through His humiliation and death. He did not strike down Satan by an obvious display of power but, in a way, beat Satan at his own game, thereby allowing the sons of Adam to become sons of the King.

This kind of reversal of expectations occurs frequently in the Bible; the following are but a few examples. The prophet Elijah experienced the presence of the Most High God not in a fierce storm or an earthquake or a fire but in the “gentle blowing” that followed (1Kings 19:12). Jesus’ very birth as an unassuming child, related by the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, reverses common expectations for the birth of an important person. The Sermon on the Mount asserts paradoxically that the downtrodden are blessed (Matt. 5). Jesus describes the salvation at the very heart of the Christian faith in self-contradictory terms: “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (John
12:32). Finally, the apostle Paul describes the resurrection of believers as a paradox: “That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies” (1 Cor. 15:36).

Rhiannon’s role as sovereignty goddess continues in Manawydan. In this branch, Rhiannon no longer embodies wisdom, as that role has switched to Manawydan’s character, but she does still have the power to bestow sovereignty. No longer does she choose her own husband, but marriage to her still awards Manawydan sovereignty over Pwyll’s old kingdom, Dyfed. This fact again reinforces the notion that the road to kingship passes through the rite of mortal marriage to the divine.

The fact that Pwyll must join the Otherworldly with the mortal through his unification with a euhemerized goddess brings to mind the concept of the Word becoming flesh propounded in the Gospel of John. In order to become a full regent, to become who he was meant to be, Pwyll must achieve reconciliation with the divine. Together, the human and the divine can ensure full protection and fertility to their people.

Just as Pwyll marries the Otherworldly Rhiannon for the good of his people, so Christ became human to provide salvation for His church. The Gospel of John asserts that “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14), and orthodox theologians have interpreted this to mean that Jesus was both the fully divine Son of God and the fully human Son of Man. St. Irenaeus says, “[N]or did He truly redeem us with His own blood, if He did not really become man” (chapter 2). The pivotal scholastic theologian Thomas Aquinas also
writes, “Christ is said to be of heaven…either as to the virtue whereby it was formed; or even as to His very Godhead. But as to matter, Christ’s body was earthly” (2177). On the other hand, St. Anselm of Canterbury argues that Jesus must have been divine in order to effect the kind of salvation and “dignity” God intended for humanity (270). The mystery of Christ’s dual divinity and humanity recalls also the mystery of the Eucharist, in which, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, the bread and wine literally turns into into the very body and blood of Christ, His “true body” (Aquinas 2428). Thus, just as the Eucharist, an all-important sacrament, must be both food and Christ’s body and blood, so Christ’s own incarnation must be both human and divine. Likewise, just as Christ combines in one body both mortal and immortal to effect the salvation of the human race, so Pwyll must secure his own union with the divine Rhiannon in order to bring about his people’s prosperity.

Rhiannon’s merciful reaction to Gwawl also makes her comparable to Christ. Whereas Pwyll and his men, after capturing the trickster, kick him until he has “received great bruises” (Mabinogion 16), Rhiannon convinces Pwyll to let Gwawl go after making the latter promise never to seek revenge for his bruises. Once again, Rhiannon demonstrates greater wisdom than Pwyll, this time because she recognizes the excellence of mercy.

Nevertheless, Pwyll’s initial lack of forgiveness does lead to unpleasant consequences for his son. The redactor reveals at the end of Manawydan that Pryderi, Pwyll’s son, and Rhiannon owe their abduction into the Otherworld to
Pwyll’s treatment of Gwawl in the First Branch. Likewise, when Gwawl’s servant Llwyd seeks revenge against Pwyll’s descendants, his lack of forgiveness almost results in his wife’s execution. In Branwen, the Irish nobles’ inability to forgive the temperamental Efnisien for insulting their king causes them to force the king to shun his new wife and Efnisien’s sister, Branwen. This shunning, in turn, leads to the invasion of Ireland by Branwen’s mighty brother Brandigeidfran and the virtual destruction of two countries. The Christian virtues of forgiveness and mercy, then, play an indispensable role in keeping the peace.

The Christian emphasis on mercy and forgiveness is almost axiomatic. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, in which He paints a picture of the Christian life, pronounces blessings on both the merciful and the peacemakers (Matt. 5:7, 9). Later, Jesus tells a parable of a servant forgiven of a large debt to his master. This same servant then abuses and threatens a fellow servant who owes him much less money than he owed his master. Upon hearing of this, the master promptly throws the first servant into prison. Jesus concludes the parable with these words: “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart” (Matt. 18:35). Having been forgiven of their sins by God, Christians are expected to forgive others, not only seven times but also the symbolic “seventy times seven times” (Matt. 18:22)—that is, indefinitely. Christians must show forgiveness because “judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13). Manawydan demonstrates perfectly
the superiority of mercy over judgment by using mercy to set the world aright again.

The concept of forgiveness, or the lack thereof, also greatly affects the Four Branches in that it colors the redactor’s portrayal of violence. The First Branch begins with low-key violence as Pwyll does battle with his Otherworldly foe Hafgan. Several aspects of this contest warrant inquiry. First, battle is, by implication, a just way of establishing hegemony in Annwn, the Otherworld kingdom to which Pwyll is sent. This has one of two possible implications for the rest of the Four Branches. If the redactor accepts battle as an acceptable way of gaining a kingdom, perhaps he does not actually condemn the terrible violence of Math, and perhaps his claim in that Branch that Caswallan has done Manawydan wrong is hypocritical. On the other hand, the battle in Annwn takes place between Pwyll and Hafgan only, as opposed to between two whole armies. A comparable concept controls Pwyll’s charge—he must only deal Hafgan a single stroke. Taken together, these two details extol mitigated violence. The moral seems to be that belligerents must control their violence responsibly. The terror of the rest of the battles in the Four Branches, then, arises from their overshooting Aristotle’s target of the golden mean. After all, the final peace between the kingdoms of Math and Pryderi follows a one-on-one duel between Pryderi and the sorcerer Gwydion.

The historical context of The Mabinogi adds significance to the theme of mitigated violence. Written probably between A.D. 1060 and 1100 (Charles-Edwards 44), the text
came into its own in a country under the sway of the Roman Catholic Church. Siewers assesses Welsh culture at the time as undergoing “conversion to [C]hristianity in a period and manner that fostered construction of cultural continuity with ancestral traditions of the land” (198). The Catholic Church perpetually fought to limit the medieval European culture of war, instituting regulations such as the Peace of God and the Truce of God, and *the Mabinogi* redactor undoubtedly absorbed this concern with peace.

Ideally, the Peace of God “was to place under special ecclesiastical protection certain classes of persons, such as monks, the clergy, and the poor” (Cowdrey 42). Initiated about a generation after the Peace (42), the Truce, first proclaimed in 1027, forbade all violence on certain days, originally Sunday (44). Cowdrey does well explaining the difference between the two legislations: “Whereas the Peace sought to protect certain classes and their goods at all times, the Truce was an attempt to stop all violence at certain times” (44). The author calls the Truce “part of churchmen’s endeavors to propagate peace” (44).

Churchmen had concerned themselves with propagating peace for a long time. Jesus’ teachings of forgiveness and turning the other cheek obviously influenced the Church’s position on violence, but by the eleventh century, the Church no longer accepted complete pacifism. The tradition of Christian limited war had influenced mainstream Christian thought since St. Augustine (Johnson 14) although just war did not become “systematic” until the time of Catholic monk and lawyer Gratian in “the middle of the twelfth century”
(Johnson 14). *The Mabinogi* redactor’s focus on limiting violence, then, fits into the Catholic trend of curbing the violent medieval way of life, specifically during the eleventh century, as well as into the Biblical theme of encouraging “the peacekeepers.”

Violence also relates to the motif of travel. One critic points out that danger often accompanies travel in the Four Branches (Jones 214). Pwyll stays mostly within his own realm, and most travel in Math entails war. Likewise, the journeys of the Irish king Matholwch and the giant king Brandigeidfran result in a war that decimates two nations. Less catastrophically but still eerily, the characters in Manawydan are threatened with violence and death wherever they go in the foreign land of Lloegyr (Jones 214-215). In an age less mobile than the modern, travel probably did usually originate from either displacement or belligerent ambition. A footnote in Siewers’s article relates that in the eleventh century, self-consciousness of being a distinct people from their Anglo-Saxon neighbors was just beginning to creep into the minds of the Welsh (196). Foreigners, like the Normans and Vikings, invaded from outside the bounds of Wales, and the Welsh who moved were forced to do so by the invaders. The Welsh, then, traveled under the compunction of others’ lust for their land.

The aversion to violence evident in *The Mabinogi* stands in contrast to the celebration of martial force found in comparable texts such as *Beowulf* and Judith. Although some critics have posited good arguments suggesting that *Beowulf* propounds a nuanced conception of violence, the poet
certainly does not emphasize forgiveness to the extent the *Mabinogi* redactor does. One critic argues that violence in *Beowulf* performs the function of justice and is illegitimately exercised when used, for example, to settle feuds (Hill 37). However, the culture of the poem has deep roots in tribal loyalties, which call for the destruction of one’s relatives’ enemies. *Beowulf*, for instance, boasts of having “avenged the Geats (their enemies brought it / upon themselves)” (*Beowulf* 423-424). Thus, the *Beowulf* poet seems to approve of feuds if they meet certain criteria; that is, one may engage in feuding if his enemies bring the feud “upon themselves.” The poet does not clearly state how one calls feud violence upon himself, but it seems that *Beowulf* accepts violence to an extent that *the Mabinogi* redactor never would. Although feuding under certain conditions sounds like the doctrine of just war, *Beowulf* differs from *The Mabinogi* in that it sees no solution to the cyclical violence of the age. Upon the death of the poem’s hero, his people stand in an unenviable position, “anticipating raids and revenge-feud on three sides” (Hill 61). *Beowulf* makes no mention of an ultimate divine justification of human deeds, no reassurance that peace will eventually triumph—indeed, much of the poem’s beauty stems from this despair. *The Mabinogi*, on the other hand, upholds limited violence and even forgiveness. Both Pryderi and Brandigeidfran die in the end, but their deaths result from foolish decisions which greater wisdom (on Pryderi’s part) or forgiveness (on the parts of Efnisien and the Irish nobles) would have prevented, and the conflicts in the story do ultimately come to an end.
Similarly, Judith has no mention of mercy. Rather, the reader is not to question the evil character of the villain Holofernes, and Judith owes her position as a laudable heroine to her very lack of equivocation concerning her assassination of Holofernes. Indeed, Judith invokes God’s mercy only to ask for strength to kill “the heathen man” (98). Also in “Cynewulf and Cyneheard,” none of the characters even considers forgiveness an option. Because the king, Sigeberht, has committed “unjust acts,” Cynewulf overthrows him and sets about establishing his own hegemony. When the previous king’s brother, Cyneheard, becomes a problem, Cynewulf seeks to kill him. Lastly, upon hearing of the death of their king and kinsman, Cyneheard’s knights reject offers of truce from Cynewulf, instead choosing to kill the usurper and all but one of his men (37-38).

Although the prospect is tempting, one must not dismissively attribute the conceptions of violence in *The Mabinogi* to its national origins. That is, the redactor of the Four Branches did not lose his taste for violence because he was a sore loser. Even other Welsh literature shows signs of glorifying violence—including the other tales of *The Mabinogion*. For example, Culhwch and Olwen contains an epic description of Culhwch’s arms (*Mabinogion* 97), a list of Culhwch’s ancestors (100-107), and a catalogue of the feats of Arthur’s knights (107-108). These knights’ fame derives from their martial prowess; Bedwyr, for example, “though he was one-handed no three warriors drew blood in the same field faster than he” (108).

Clearly, *The Mabinogi* came to bloom in a sanguinary
culture dangling somewhere between the tribal days of *Beowulf* and the feudal times of the Arthurian romances. Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of violence in its society—even within the physical bindings of *The Mabinogion*—the redactor of the Four Branches asserts a counter-cultural aversion to violence and preference for creative pacifism. Whereas the predominant literary culture apparently did not provide him with this influence, Christian tradition certainly has the potential to have instilled just war tendencies in an author of folk stories. Given the other parallels between the Christian narrative and the Four Branches, Christianity very likely had a much larger influence upon *The Mabinogi* redactor’s views than paganism or contemporary culture.

Returning to Rhiannon, one next notices that “teachers and wise men” (*Mabinogion* 19) sentence her to carry travelers on her back in penance for a crime she did not commit. In the same way, Christ’s ultimate show of humility began when He, though innocent, was condemned to die. Even the Roman official responsible for His condemnation, Pilate, declares to the Jews who want Jesus killed, “[N]othing deserving death has been done by Him” (Luke 23:15). His passion and death express most fully His mission to bear the burdens of humanity. Thus, just as Christ acts as a Christian’s bridge to the Father’s presence, the “one mediator…between God and men” (1 Tim. 2:5), so Rhiannon’s humility—or humiliation—allows her to carry travelers to the king.

The theme of self-sacrifice, though present in Rhiannon’s tale, emerges more explicitly in the Second Branch. Branwen
begins the self-sacrificial peacemaking process by allowing herself to be given in marriage to Matholwch. By marrying the Irish king, she leaves the presence of her brother, whose great stature clearly identifies him as a partially divine character. She, like Christ, leaves the presence of the King to live with those of lesser greatness and effect peace between the two realms. Of course, Branwen does not completely fulfill a Christ type because she, by her own confession, causes the destruction of two islands. Unlike Christ, who “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death” (Philip. 2:8), Branwen calls her brother to rescue her by invading Ireland—with tragic consequences.

Efnisien also exhibits self-sacrifice in Branwen. Although throughout most of the story he maliciously causes trouble, Efnisien redeems himself in the end through self-sacrifice. Because the Irish possess the cauldron of rebirth, the war Efnisien causes threatens to annihilate his countrymen; however, after realizing his guilt, he throws himself into the cauldron and breaks it, simultaneously breaking his own heart. In this way, Efnisien leaves the story, and the mortal world, as a good character. Though not innocent like Christ, Efnisien does make a Christ-like sacrifice.

Brandigeidfran undeniably provides the most explicit Christ type in the Second Branch, however. Throughout the story, Brandigeidfran excels in his role as a righteous, generous king. He gives his sister to Matholwch in order to make peace, he compensates Matholwch much past what the insult requires when Efnisien offends the Irish king,
and he attacks Ireland only in defense of the helpless. His willingness to make peace mirrors God’s willingness to reconcile man to Himself by giving His Son in marriage to His redeemed Church. Brandigeidfran’s generosity ties him not only to the ideal king of Anglo-Saxon tradition (whom Beowulf would call the “ring-giver” [1486]) but also to the Christian virtues of forgiveness and mercy that Pwyll so conspicuously lacks. His willingness to forgive has the capacity to end the possible hostility between his kingdom and Ireland, except that the Irish nobles keep their grudge and pressure Matholwch to punish Branwen. He again attempts to preclude violence through forgiveness when the Irish build a house for him and promise to let his nephew reign in Matholwch’s stead, but Efnisien kills the child. Indeed, the hostilities begin in the first place only because of Brandigeidfran’s need to protect Branwen from her persecutors. Thus, Brandigeidfran gives generously, forgives, protects, and tries to make peace—all Christ-like activities a ruler should imitate.

The most Christ-like of Brandigeidfran’s laudable qualities, however, is his self-sacrifice. When a spear in the foot—a possible reference to Achilles or even to Eve’s descendant’s being bruised on the heel (Gen. 3:15)—begins to sap the life from him, the king commands his friends to cut off his head and bury it in London, facing France. As long as it remains under the soil of London, the head will protect the island from invasion. The king’s sacrifice, therefore, saves a multitude of his subjects from external malice. In the same way, Christ submitted to execution for
the sake of His followers (John 10:18). The salvation He offers does not depend on His staying buried; rather, Paul cites His resurrection as the proof of His saving power (1 Cor. 15:14). Still, as the Head of the Church (Eph. 5:23), the risen Jesus protects Christians from the malice of Satan, who seeks to devour Christians like a lion (1 Peter 5:8).

To return for the last time to Rhiannon, one notices the manner of the queen’s reinstatement. She regains her innocence and rightful place at the king’s side only after the return of her son. Likewise, “because of the suffering of death,” Christ is “crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9). In other words, having secured salvation for His followers, Christ received the glory He had before His incarnation. Both Christ and Rhiannon suffer vicarious punishment for sins they did not commit, and both regain their former glories after their suffering.

Despite numerous parallels, one major discrepancy makes Rhiannon different from Christ, namely their genders. A male-dominated society would have frowned upon referring to Christ as a woman. However, a few precedents blunt the importunity of such reference. Firstly, Christ refers to Himself as a mother hen in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 13:34). Secondly, an ancient Hebrew tradition identifies wisdom as female; Proverbs personifies Wisdom as a woman who stands in the streets and cries out (Prov. 1). Christ, as logos (John 1), and Rhiannon may both be considered wisdom personified. Thus, there can be no absolute ban on referring to Christ as female.
McKenna’s mention of Rhiannon’s wisdom leads to an analysis of the comparative wisdom of other characters in the Four Branches, the first of whom is Pwyll. McKenna interprets the whole First Branch as Pwyll’s journey toward wisdom as a result of Arawn’s lessons (321-323), and a footnote reports that Pwyll’s name means “Sense” (*Mabinogion* 23). Indeed, Pwyll’s and Pryderi’s stories dramatize patterns of foolishness and wisdom rather strongly.

Pwyll first appears as a foolishly prideful prince driving another’s dogs away from a stag and taking the animal for himself. Certainly, as Arawn’s reaction shows, Pwyll acts foolishly in this. The prince soon redeems himself, however, by obeying Arawn’s requests. He shows his discerning side both by refusing to strike Hafgan more than once and by refusing to sleep with Arawn’s wife. His wisdom in these two areas earns him the title Head of Annwn as well as friendship with Arawn that benefits Pryderi even after Pwyll’s death. As Gantz highlights, the second episode of the First Branch repeats this pattern of selfish pride followed by more discerning wisdom (267). In the second episode, after the exposition in which Pwyll meets Rhiannon, Pwyll foolishly promises too much to Gwawl. He again has the chance to redeem himself, however, by following Rhiannon’s instructions. Having captured Gwawl, instead of demonstrating increased humility, Pwyll once more behaves proudly, treating Gwawl with unnecessary cruelty. Once again, Rhiannon’s instructions curb Pwyll’s lack of mercy and allow him to escape retaliation—though his son will still
bear the vengeance for this act. Gantz overlooks, however, the important manifestation of Pwyll’s foolishness when the prince first meets Rhiannon. Instead of taking the sensible approach and calling out to her, Pwyll proudly sends his fastest horses after Rhiannon. Indeed, when he finally does admit that he cannot overtake her, Rhiannon chides him, saying it would have been better for his horses if he had simply asked earlier.

In each of these episodes, Pwyll’s pride informs his foolishness and threatens to come before his fall. He claims Arawn’s stag presumably because he assumes no one outranking him would hunt in his dominions (McKenna 322). He fails to call out to Rhiannon because his pride will not allow him to admit he cannot catch her. Infected by the headiness of pride, he promises Gwawl whatever the other would ask. Finally, proud of having caught Gwawl, he tortures his vanquished enemy without considering the possibility that he may start a feud. Foolishness and pride, then, are linked inextricably.

Pwyll’s willingness to humble himself and obey directions provides him with freedom from the consequences of his pride in each episode. He obeys Arawn’s injunction not to strike Hafgan twice, Rhiannon’s suggestion on how to catch Gwawl, and Rhiannon and her father’s plea not to kill Gwawl in a bag. He meets Rhiannon only after he humbles himself enough to admit he cannot catch her. In the final episode of the First Branch, his humility leads him to obey the wishes of his nobles—now that he has learned from Arawn how to obey others (McKenna 323)—who worry he
will have no heir.

Pryderi suffers from a similar character flaw. His pride first manifests itself when, in Lloegyr, he wants to fight the tradesmen who plot to kill him and Manawydan. As Manawydan informs him, fighting would only provoke the authorities to imprison them. Nevertheless, each time the tradesmen conspire against the two main characters, Pryderi wants to stand and fight. Also, when a strange castle appears where there had been no castle before, Pryderi proudly rushes in after his dogs, possibly desiring to prove his lordship over the lands he hunts. In fact, he proves nothing but his impetuosity.

If Pryderi inherits his father’s flaws, he also inherits Pwyll’s redeeming characteristics of generosity and friendship. Pryderi’s initial gifts to Manawydan of Rhiannon as wife and Dyfed as property guarantee Manawydan’s loyalty throughout the story—a loyalty which saves Pryderi from both starvation and exile to the Otherworld. The redactor never shows Pryderi humble himself. Instead, Pryderi rashly trades, against his agreement with Arawn, all the pigs he has received from Annwn for the apparitional creatures fashioned by the scheming sorcerer Gwydion, thus bringing his dynasty to an end.

Manawydan, on the other hand, exemplifies patient humility. Though the cousin of Brandigeidfran, he claims no right to the throne when he returns to Wales from Ireland, just as Christ came into the world humbly. Despite his noble birth, he does not disdain to work as a cobbler, shield maker, or saddle maker—nor would he have refused work
as a carpenter, one assumes. When the tradesmen of Lloegyr plot to kill him, he does not take umbrage but recognizes his vulnerability and flees. When his dogs chase an unusual-looking boar into a castle that has appeared overnight, he does not rashly charge in but holds back. When he has caught one of the mice that have been destroying his wheat and a succession of clerics tries to persuade him to release the mouse, he refuses and presses his advantage until he has gained what he wants. In contrast to Pwyll, he knows instinctively to demand that Llwyd not take vengeance upon him. In all these situations, Manawydan shows discretion clearly the opposite of Pwyll’s and Pryderi’s impetuosity.

The importance of humility in Christianity is almost impossible to overemphasize. From the very birth of Christ in a manger (Luke 2) to His baptism by His inferior (Matt. 3:13-15) and His ignominious death as a criminal, Jesus preferred accepting a humble role to exercising His divine power. Indeed, the Apostle Paul admonishes the Philippians to imitate Christ, who took “the form of a bondservant” and “humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death” (Philip. 2:7, 8). Not only did Christ Himself accept ignominy, but He frequently encouraged His followers to humble themselves. His Sermon on the Mount proclaims, “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5). Similarly, He later takes a small child in His arms and says, “Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:4). He also states at one point, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be
exalted” (Luke 14:11). James also says, “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you” (James 4:10).

This necessity of humility is underscored not only in the New Testament but also in the Old. Throughout the Old Testament, God exalts the humble while humiliating the proud. To teach this lesson, He even curses King Nebuchadnezzar to spend seven years living as a beast (Daniel 5:20-21). God also commands the Israelites, through Moses, to spend a day of every year atoning for their sins, so that they would “humble [their] souls” (Lev. 16:29, 31). Even King Ahab, a classic example of an evil king, averts God’s judgment by humbling himself: “Do you see how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but I will bring the evil upon his house in his son’s days” (1 Kings 21:29). In summarizing His activities to Job, God says that He will “Look on everyone who is proud, and humble him” (Job 40:12). The Psalms frequently express hope that God will bless the humble. For example, Psalm 37:11 declares, “But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.”

The redactor of The Mabinogi internalizes the concept of humility so central to Biblical righteousness and seems to imply that interactions with the Otherworld require the humility praised by the Biblical writers. Only humility saves Pwyll from Arawn’s wrath and causes him to become Head of Annwn; humility establishes Pwyll as a just king after his identity trade with Arawn; only with humility could he meet
Rhiannon; and humility allows him to become respected enough that Teyrnon is willing to return Pryderi (McKenna 325-326). In each of these cases, Pwyll’s encounter with the Otherworld has a positive outcome only when the king shows humility.

Properly applied, this principle will also govern interactions with the Christian God. In his essay on *The Mabinogi* as a “Welsh Old Testament” (196), Siewers argues medieval monasticism led to an “appreciation of the role of the physical in spiritual life” so that ecclesiastic sites became Otherworld portals (198). In this euhemerizing of the land, the Celtic creativity that gave rise to the myths of the gods channeled its creativity into mythologizing Christianity. Thus, what once symbolized ambiguous connections to a mythical world of magic now came to symbolize connections to the Christian God; from a Roman perspective, the Celts incorporated Christian churches into their eccentric worldview. Given this tendency of medieval Celtic minds, it is likely that the redactor of *The Mabinogi* applies the necessity of reverence in interaction with the Otherworld to interactions with the Christian God. That is, he uses his mythology to instill in his audience reverence for the spiritual, which in his time would mean reverence for the Catholic Church. After all, the Church alone had the power to grant or deny salvation through the sacraments. Although written after *The Mabinogi*, Pope Boniface VIII’s papal bull *Unam Sanctam* expresses this idea well: “there is one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, outside of which there is neither salvation nor remission of sins.” Any Welshman who
aspired to heaven, then, would do well to treat the Church with reverence.

A careful analysis of the comparisons and contrasts implied by *The Mabinogi*’s repeated variations on recurring situations and character traits reveals a strong Christian influence that is commonly overlooked in favor of pagan influences. Rhiannon’s character, in its implications of human unity with the divine, strongly supports the parallel with Christ. The three self-sacrificial characters in Branwen and their implications for the redactor’s view of violence in Math, extol Christ-like qualities, especially in rulers. The depiction of violence, much more likely influenced by Christianity than by paganism, particularly emphasizes forgiveness and mercy. Finally, Pwyll’s and Pryderi’s foolishness, contrasted with Manawydan’s exemplary wisdom, displays the necessity of reverence for spiritual matters. All these characteristics and attributes and their moral lessons make *The Mabinogi* an example of Christ’s fulfillment of the Celtic concept of divinity.
Works Cited


