CHAPTER 9

MARKING TIME:

BRANWEN, DAUGHTER OF LLYR AND THE COLONIAL REFRAIN

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This chapter explores the work that "Time" performs both inside and outside the colonialist imaginary, finding in a Welsh text a compelling argument against the "natural" loss of the past.

The very first thing that strikes one in reading the "Mabinogion" is how evidently the medieval story-teller is pillaging an antiquity of which he does not fully possess the secret; he is like a peasant building his hut on the site of Halicarnassus or Ephesus; he builds, but what he builds is full of materials of which he knows not the history, or knows by a glimmering tradition merely—stones "not of this building," but of an older architecture, greater, cunninger, more majestic.

—*Matthew Arnold, On the Study of Celtic Literature*

If Matthew Arnold's writings on culture are among his best-known works, his appreciation of Welsh language and literature, while less well known, may be only marginally less influential. Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, following Ernest Renan's 1854 *Essai sur la Poesie des Races Celtiques* (both of which followed Lady Charlotte Guest's publication of *The Mabinogion*, beginning in 1835) focused well-deserved attention, both

scholarly and popular, on the *Mabinogi* and on Welsh literary texts more generally.¹ The authority of Arnold's opinion has been important to Welsh scholars, a fact evidenced by the frequency with which the passage cited as epigraph appears in scholarly accounts. C. W. Sullivan calls Arnold "the godfather" of the "search for sources," a scholarly pursuit that "was to guide *Mabinogi* criticism for almost 100 years" (xvii). Preeminent Celticist Rachel Bromwich identifies Arnold with "inaugurat[ing] . . . a dispassionate and scholarly attitude towards Celtic Studies which made possible their acceptance . . . as a serious academic discipline."² Indeed, Arnold's appreciation of the importance of Celtic literatures to what he called "the English spirit" led him to push for the establishment of a chair of Celtic at Oxford, a chair that remains today in the faculty of Medieval and Modern European Languages.³

Arnold's sponsorship of Celtic studies deserves analysis, especially in light of the provocative imagery used in the passage just cited. In Arnold's formulation the Welsh artist appears not as a conscious cultural agent intervening in his own historical moment but as an accidental tourist only dimly aware of the "glimmering tradition" with which he works. "Like a peasant building his hut," the Welsh writer crafts a rustic, unrefined text from the remains of a "greater, cunninger, more majestic" tradition. Welsh medieval literary endeavor is always already imbued with the most incalculable of losses. Its once-majestic tradition recurs, but only in broken fragments. For all his romantic delectation of the lost majesty of Welsh art, Arnold offers no testimony to the specific history, or to the agents, of its destruction. Nor does he attend to the poignant details of the *Mabinogi* writer's historical moment. The force to which Welsh literature submits seems here the disembodied, yet irresistible, passage of Time itself. In a formulation that both alludes to a history of conquest and represses it, the Welsh writer "pillages an antiquity" that is apparently not his own. This image of a literary past lost not through acts of conquest but through the ravages of Time testifies to melancholy loss; yet it also hides the particular losses suffered by Welsh victims in the dim mists of an archaic, irrecoverable past. Conquest is recast as cultural decline.

As his role in the establishment of Celtic studies makes clear, Arnold was passionately interested in mediating the loss of medieval Welsh texts. He argued for a recovery of the "roots" of "Celtic Literature" through the "science of philology," bringing "the Celt and sound criticism together . . . almost for the first time in their lives." Robert J. C. Young's postcolonial reading of Arnold's cultural theories suggests that the latter's recommendation of philology as a "disinterested, positive, and constructive criticism" was not itself historically disinterested.⁴ On one hand, Arnold's account of the instrumentality of Celtic literatures to English culture challenged more

deeply racist beliefs of the time, beliefs that the "Celts" were an illegitimate and disordered race who deserved to be, in the words of Robert Knox, "forced from the soil."⁵ Yet Arnold's appreciation of Welsh language did not extend to contemporary, or political, uses of it; he actively opposed Welsh as the language of instruction in Welsh schools. *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, moreover, argues for the preservation of Celtic culture not as "an active, living, force" but as "an object of academic study, the museum relic of an extinct culture."⁶ Arnold's account, Young argues, remains structured by a colonialist desire:

The Celtic spirit can be released into English culture by turning it into an academic subject, so that it becomes part of English culture just as the Celt is, Arnold claims, part of the English race. Never was the colonial relation to other cultures in the 19th century more clearly stated: the force of "modern civilization" destroys the last vestiges of a vanquished culture to turn it into an object of academic study, with its own university chair.⁷

Celtic studies developed through a genealogy rife with colonial consolidations. Very old texts, like "primitive" peoples, offer a site wherein the power of "modernity"—its putatively "dispassionate" and "scientific" methods—pierces secrets, transforming the unknowable into categories for study. This history is not, of course, unique to Celtic studies. Postcolonial theorists remind us that the disciplines of British literature, positivist history, and evolutionary science, to name only a few, are similarly implicated in the production of colonialist knowledge systems. Postcolonial cultural studies (particularly that branch called colonial-discourse analysis, identified with the work of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha) suggests that, in addition to the annexation of land, the commodification of marketable resources and objects, the disruption of "native" ruling structures and "native" cultural productions, colonialism "permeated forms of knowledge," even the very structures through which we may "try to understand colonialism itself."⁸ First identified with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, this insight has led Homi Bhabha to call for a "critical ethnography of the West," that is, an examination of the structures of Western knowledge systems as products of colonial desire and colonialist politics.

It is from this vantage that I wish to reconsider the colonial implications of the archaic past offered by one of the four "branches" of the *Mabinogi*, "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr." It is from this view, moreover, that I wish to rethink Arnold's role in a history whereby as Rachel Bromwich puts it, "a dispassionate and scholarly attitude . . . made possible [the] acceptance" of Celtic studies "as a serious academic discipline."⁹ I begin with a more detailed, if necessarily brief, explication of the archaic past,

its loss and recovery in *On the Study of Celtic Literatures*. Next I read "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr," for its depiction of loss and change and for what it offers for a postcolonial view of the archaic. In the discussion that follows I hope to refute the persistent misapprehension that the object of study for medievalists is the time "before" colonialism, or the implication that historical specificity of medieval colonial relations means that they have little in common with later affairs. Instead, I will offer a view of how colonialism repeats and recurs in some habits and assumptions important to medieval studies, and suggest that medievalists might contribute to the "discourse of oppositionality" postcolonial cultural studies demands.¹⁰

In my attention to the colonial history particular to Celtic studies I do not wish to isolate this important field or to suggest it be discarded as a vestige of colonial contamination. My intention is quite the opposite, and my reading of "Branwen" is possible only because of the important, difficult work done by specialists in Welsh history, language, and literature. Yet I do hope to show that all our dreamings of the Middle Ages must confront the possibility that colonialist desires and demands are embedded in our view of time, in the "science" of our methodologies, and in the "dispassionate" truths structuring our histories.

Past Times

Matthew Arnold identifies an English-speaking consolidation "of all the inhabitants of these islands" with the "real and legitimate force" of "modern civilization."¹¹ This is, for Arnold, "a mere affair of time,"

of what is called modern civilisation, and modern civilisation is a real, legitimate force; the change must come and its accomplishment is a mere affair of time. The sooner the Welsh language disappears as an instrument of the practical, political, and social life of Wales, the better; the better for England, the better for Wales itself. . . . The moment [the Welsh author] has anything of real importance to say, anything the world will the least care to hear, he must speak English. . . . For all modern purposes, I repeat, let us all as soon as possible be one people; let the Welshman speak English and, if he is an author, let him write English.¹²

On their face, Arnold's words imply the loss of a Welsh linguistic future as a progressivist fait accompli. The putatively civilizing influence of English figures as a corollary not to colonial relations, but to the irresistible passage of time. Progress, change, and "modernity" become the demand to which Welsh literati must submit, at least if they have anything important to say that the world will want to hear. Yet Arnold's self-conscious repetition of

the force of modern English betrays an anxious concern with Welsh resistance. What begins as a passionate praise of modernity becomes finally a plea that the Welsh writer change to accommodate English linguistic nationalism. Arnold's description of the relentless demands of modernity thus displays, through its repetition and its anxiety, a tendentious colonial demand. Definitions of a progressive modernity converge with desires to annihilate the "prodigiously living" aspect of Welsh linguistic difference.¹³ In Arnold's view, resistance to English linguistic hegemony figures simultaneously as regressive, narrow, and, perhaps worst of all, trivial.

Anne McClintock argues that notions of modernity like Arnold's consolidate imperial authority. In this trope of time, "colonized people do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency—the living embodiment of the archaic 'primitive.'"¹⁴ Tropes of the archaic persist throughout *On the Study of Celtic Literature*; Wales stands not as a modern, literate, civilization but, like the *Mabinogi* itself, as "a perfect treasure house of mysterious ruins."¹⁵ This may be precisely why the study of premodern Welsh literature becomes, for Arnold, a crucial avenue for cultural recovery. Welsh linguistic culture remains legitimated so long as it offers a purchase on a past archaic richness, removed from any political and historical context. Arnold's essay displays the richness of Welsh cultural difference without implying that such diversities deserve a political future.

Yet the question of a future remains important to Arnold, who imagines a happier insular future through the "scientific" study of philology, a "dispassionate" approach that can reach beyond the prejudices of his time. Philology "carries us toward ideas of affinity of race" with the ambitious hopes that the "gentle ministrations of science" might deliver "a message of peace to Ireland."¹⁶ Arnold's recommendation of the legitimate study of past Welsh literature through the disinterested "science of philology" was designed in part to disable late-Victorian racism, offering a crucial alternative to the standard English opinion of the time. Yet it also rendered illegitimate the passionate efforts of Welsh linguistic resistance.¹⁷ So long as the dispassionate method of science defines the serious, legitimate, and scholarly approach, any interested, passionate response to the particular history of Welsh losses, and any passionate resistance to an "English-only" future, becomes as illegitimate (and as irrational) as anti-Welsh racism. Arguments about the progressive import of a linguistic scientific method ensure that the study of Welsh literature invigorates a totalizing English modernity. A linguistic past devoid of the materiality of its politics consolidates the loss of the modern Welsh language in the service of an "English-speaking" insular whole. There is, moreover, a larger racial politics here, for

Arnold praises ancient Welsh literature in the service of insular unity while England annexes the Indian subcontinent. An independent India will be the next "archaic" culture lost to an English view of "progress."

Evidence from Arnold's essay corroborates the insistence in postcolonial cultural studies that our commitment to progressive chronologies remains a legacy of colonialism. Arnold's account of progress replaces the opposition of English to Welsh with the opposition of science to passion. Yet his putatively inclusive, broad-minded scientific method fronts the narrow interests of English culture and renders Welsh linguistic partisanship as the vestige of an archaic insular fragmentation.¹⁸ To what extent, we must ask, does Arnold's nineteenth-century colonial view still haunt these methods? How frequently does source study or philology encourage scholars to treat the traditional texts of linguistic minorities as repositories of archaic fragments, or as linguistic treasure houses, rather than to examine what Patrick Ford calls the "integrity of their texts"?¹⁹ To what extent do these methods underemphasize the linguistic and cultural agency of authors working with oral formulaic motifs? I ask these questions not to suggest we eschew philology or source study as hopelessly contaminated methods, but to remind us of their politically interested implications. Embedded in the assumption that the scientific truth of philology is superior to the passions of politics is a politicized history that enshrines English modernity as progressive by locating a polyglot, fragmented insular culture in a lost medieval past.

Like Arnold's essay, "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr" depicts Welsh culture amid loss. Yet unlike Arnold's work, "Branwen" shows us that loss results from a specific set of geopolitical and historical actions rather than from the irresistible, disembodied passage of time. The author/redactor of "Branwen" imagines a future edged with poignant images of guilt and desolation; this text testifies not to "a mysterious treasure house of riches" but to the complex agency of an author on the border between a native, oral past and a colonized, textual future. "Branwen" tells this story through a fragmentary and allusive narrative, and I will read this tale through a history of colonial relations despite the fact that it offers no sequential, explicit chronology of colonization. Instead of a linear history of imperial origin, we find a repetitive and fragmented account of the doubleness of loss and survival, told through a complicated memoir of inner-Celtic affections and aggressions. This is a story about Welsh survival despite disastrous loss and despite the failed alliance between two "Celtic" cultures. The double, and dissipated, logic of this tale—its use of archaic time—eludes a colonial gaze that views the archaic and the fragmentary only as regressive preconditions for modernity and civilization. In "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr," archaic fragmentation comes as the denouement to colonial complications, and it speaks of inconsolable loss.

Border Voices: Branwen and Colonial Loss

By all accounts "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr" travels well through time.²⁰ Most scholars agree, moreover, that "Branwen" has important historicist ambitions of its own. Historical approaches have been important to *Mabinogi* scholarship, originally through source study. Attention to the texts' aesthetic strengths later augmented source study, and recent readings examine the social and political contexts, often through a comparative literary method.²¹ This scholarly genealogy implicitly positions the *Mabinogi* on a set of frontiers—some temporal, like the shift from oral tradition to manuscript culture, others territorial, as in the consideration of the texts' "Celtic," "European," or English concerns. Borders, and the cultural losses and survivals produced at such places and during such times, are thus implicitly important to scholarship; yet they remain undeveloped for a reading of the texts themselves.

In the second "branch" of the *Mabinogi*, the border position of the texts resonates with the figure of Branwen. Through her marriage to the Irish king Matholwch, Branwen inhabits the border between two warring neighbors as kin of both; eventually she becomes the proximate cause of their conflict, a relationship she attempts to rectify by forging peace between them. But the assignment of dual loyalties within the story's complex network of relationships backfires, resulting in the almost total annihilation of one people and the near destruction of the other.²² The tale complicates Branwen's intercultural relation early on when it describes her marriage with Matholwch as a means to "Ymrwymaw Ynys Y Kedeirn ac Iwerdon y gyt, ual y bydynt gadarnach" [to bind the Isle of the Mighty with Ireland so that together (they) will be mightier].²³ Apparently the political and military fortunes of both Ireland and Wales need strengthening, and the existence of a common enemy whose imperialistic ambitions might inspire such an alliance is thus both implied and repressed.²⁴

A view to the periods with which this text is identified proves instructive here. England's aggressions toward Wales and Ireland intensified in both centuries identified with this text's emergence, the twelfth and the fourteenth. When viewed from the perspective of England's colonial aggressions vis-à-vis the so-called Celtic Fringe, the "Red Book" manuscript becomes politically provocative. Within it we read both the tale of "Branwen," a text that can only allude to the political context of English imperialism, alongside explicit historical accounts of England's imperialistic encroachment upon Wales and Ireland. That codex includes, for example, a version of the *Brut y Tywysogyon* (Chronicle of Princes), which tells of Henry II's journey through Wales on his way to Ireland in 1171.²⁵ Historians expand on primary source testimony describing the structural

upheaval accompanying the social, political, and economic devastation during the period.²⁶ The late fourteenth century (the date of the Red Book) is famous for both the Glyn Dwr rebellion and the racism of English anti-Welsh Penal Laws; and prophecies of a "Celtic Federation" uniting to throw off the yoke of the English were in the air.²⁷

But how does the story of an Irish/Welsh alliance pertain to Welsh anxieties vis-à-vis the English? We still need to explore the significance of the tale's specifically Irish/Welsh rivalry. The network of Irish/Welsh relationships in both the narrative and in late-medieval history proves to be quite complex. The alliance Branwen embodies becomes so problematic for both parties that neither becomes stronger; in fact, Celtic "inner" rivalries become the central conflict, emerging when Branwen's stepbrother, Efnisien, insults the Irish. His act of purported political and cultural loyalty to the Welsh suggests a split in the "Welsh" position—although Efnisien is present at the forging of the Irish/Welsh alliance in the tale's opening moments, he nonetheless nearly succeeds in destroying it. His actions foreground the uneasy nature of an Irish/Welsh union, eventually shattering the delicate balance of Branwen's position as "foreign" queen.

Bran redresses Efnisien's affront, but Irish grumbling recurs when, years after the wedding, Matholoch's familiars demand that Branwen be held guilty, by kinship association, of Efnisien's insult. This puzzling return of an insult already remedied drives the remainder of the tale. It poignantly depicts trauma's repetition, showing how past losses and aggressions erupt to disrupt the present, a point to which I will eventually return. As a result of this disruption Branwen becomes a political prisoner of the Irish court. She is now a victim of "foreign" oppression, and here the role of Ireland in the tale, and in the political context that surrounds it, seems to shift.²⁸ Ireland moves from ally to enemy of the Welsh, rejecting and imprisoning that bond intended to make both kingdoms "mightier."

Ambivalence toward Ireland resonates with historical testimony about Irish/Welsh relations throughout the medieval period. Although there were times when Welsh nobles fled to Ireland in search of sanctuary from the Anglo-Normans, in the past Dublin had launched invasions across the Irish sea. Wales was positioned defensively on all sides, and historical records evidence the rivalries among precisely those countries that many imagine as a romantically unified "Celtic Federation." Given the vulnerability of Welsh geopolitical fortunes, cultural safety could exist only within Welsh borders. If we add to this the larger context of English aggression toward both Celtic lands, we may arrive at some sense of the ambivalence with which the Welsh might have perceived their Irish neighbors and their potential as allies. Indeed, as I shall argue later, the issue of cultural loyalty to a Welsh people becomes the central problem the tale of "Branwen" at-

tempts to resolve, a problem raised early on in Efnisien's refusal to acquiesce to Bran's decision for Irish alliance. And despite the fact that the tale seems well aware of Branwen's persistent good faith and ingenuity under very difficult circumstances, her explicit position in between Ireland and Wales makes *her* activity, rather than Efnisien's, the focus for anxieties about group loyalty.

The difficulties of Branwen's border position, moreover, are linked with her facility with speech and texts. While a prisoner of the Irish, Branwen "speaks" for the first time. Her speech is not traditionally linguistic, nor is it immediately directed toward a human being. Over a period of years, Branwen "Meithryn ederyn drydwen a wnæth hitheu ar dal y noe gyt a hi, a dyscu ieith idi, a menegi y'r ederyn y ryw wr oed brawt" [nourished a starling, on the edge of her kneading-trough, she did teach it speech, and tell the bird the kind of man her brother was].²⁹ Branwen's relationship with the starling places her again on a cultural border, one linked specifically to linguistic technologies: the oral, prelinguistic, "natural" world of the bird and the textual, symbolic world of political action. Hence her message to her brother Bran (who, apparently, is literate, as is she) is written that he might understand it. Branwen does not expect Bran to speak to the bird, nor does the bird use spoken language to communicate Branwen's pleas for help, despite the fact that she has taught it "ieith," speech. Branwen's use of written text is superfluous given the bird's learned facility with speech; yet she can speak the language of both bird and text, and by her "bilingual" position gains a temporary liberation. Informing her family of Irish insults against her, Branwen invites military intervention on her behalf. Yet, tragically, her return to her Welsh "roots" for rescue ushers in devastating destruction for both Celtic cultures.

Branwen's position on a linguistic border has particular resonances for the cultural agency of the Welsh author/compiler. The tale's emphasis on the bilingual nature of Branwen's act (and the repetition of the starling's link to technologies both of speech and of texts) marks Branwen as a displaced figure of bardic power; in the rest of the tale, as we will see, Branwen's desolate end helps contain and control scribal anxieties about linguistic and textual change, anxieties that allude to the problems of colonial accommodation. The textual inscription of an oral tradition like the *Mabinogi* would require the same sort of "bilingual" facility on the part of a scribe/redactor that Branwen herself deploys. Steeped in an older, native, oral tradition, anxious about its survival, Welsh authors may have felt themselves trapped and desperate in much the same way as Branwen, with their only hope of preserving their traditional oral culture resting on their ability to translate it into a new language: the language of texts. In the more textually based imperialistic culture of England, Welsh bards must plant

their feet in the same two worlds as Branwen, remembering the old ways and accommodating themselves to textual innovations.

Evidence suggests that both the compiler of the *Mabinogi* and the professional scribes of the Red Book coped with changes in textual production. Proinsias Mac Cana implicitly positions the *Mabinogi* writer on an oral/textual border when he describes his prose as "consciously wrought from a judicious blend of colloquial and learned techniques," yet "a talent more at home with Latin manuscript texts than with the oral telling of myth."³⁰ While offering important objections to Mac Cana's approach, Patrick Ford links narrative changes with both "textual integrity" and with a community's preservation of its cultural traditions. Following Susan Wittig's account of the narrative structure of Middle English romance, Ford links narrative "structural shifts" with the "reinforcement and perpetuation of certain social and political beliefs held by the community."³¹ Gifford Charles-Edwards, moreover, identifies the period of the Red Book's production, following the decline of monastic scriptoria, with the emergence of Oxford-educated, professional, secular scribes in Wales.³² Crafting a manuscript of Welsh cultural "riches" like that of the Red Book of Hergest offers a method for preserving a tradition under siege while accommodating a textual technology important to colonial governments and in a book hand learned at an English cultural center. Loss infuses such moments of cultural change.³³

Branwen's ultimate fate at the hands of the compiler or scribe expresses the experience of this kind of loss, the inevitability of which is evident when her "bilingual" act results in a war between the two "allies" with Branwen's son Gwern, the incarnation of the Irish/Welsh alliance, at its center. The question of Gwern's ability to be loyal to his Welsh relatives, having been fostered "in the best place for men in Ireland," disturbs Efnisien, who, rather than risk an "unbalanced" union, destroys both the boy and the relationship. The resulting battle kills all the Irish lords and all but seven of the Welsh. The issue of orality recurs at this point in the "cauldron of rebirth" episode, a moment often viewed as a particularly awkward interpolation of an oral, folkloric motif. Efnisien catches and kills Irish warriors whose speech reveals their hiding places; these once-dead warriors emerge from this cauldron magically resurrected yet mute. Ford suggests that this image of a military force without the facility of speech resonates with a cultural concern over the disruptive and violent power of warriors. Yet since it is a warrior's verbosity that emerges as dangerous and deservedly lost, I would argue that the text is emphasizing orality here, within the context of war. Orality proves dangerous in times of war, an image that resonates with the disruptive consequence of Branwen's earlier bilingual powers. Here orality links with the Irish as enemies of the Welsh;

the loss of orality constitutes one step in the triumph of the Welsh over them. And this loss comes not through an irresistible, disembodied passage of time but as the result of a particular, and particularly complicated, battle. The implications of this for the position of the author/compiler will be clearer in a moment.

Branwen's border position appears more complicated than that of the loose-lipped Irish warriors. Her response to her son Gwern contrasts with Efnisien's, and I turn for a moment to the question of Branwen's loyalties. She attempts to save her son's life not out of some transcendent principle of right or duty to a people but out of her maternal tie to a particular individual, what the story would have us see as a poignant, if selfish, fixation with a particular relationship. Her refusal to forgo the particularities of her maternal relationship ultimately results in her death, once she returns to Wales. But why does the tale finally shift from Branwen's doubled role as a mediator between two cultures to her position as mother and to her maternal desire to rescue the particular life of her son? And why does Bran, who restrains her from saving Gwern's life, come to represent the communal "good" of the Welsh "people" rather than the particularity of Welsh interests vis-à-vis the Irish? Why does Branwen finally figure herself, in contrast to Efnisien, as the selfish destroyer of both peoples whose alliance she earlier embodied?

Branwen banishes Welsh fear over a loss of cultural sovereignty. If the compiler/scribe can contain the dangerous aspects of his own border position within the person of Branwen, he can control his fear and imagine a different ending. This "different" ending for Wales appears in the "head of the king" motif, where the remnant Welsh community, once Branwen is dead, maintains its tie to its cultural past by creating a new court centered on the severed "head" of Bran. This head protects the community from the dangers of assimilation and grants it prosperity and happiness as it rebuilds itself. The transcendental community lives on for many years, protected, indeed nurtured, by the transcendental "Father."

In contrast to Bran's magical power to recover the fortunes of his troubled community beyond death, Branwen holds herself responsible for bringing death to her two families: "Alas, son of God," she says as she dies, "woe that I was ever born, for two good islands were destroyed because of me" ["Oy a uab Duw," heb hi, "guae ui o'm ganedigaeth. Ys da dwy ynys a diffeithwyd o'm achaws I"].³⁴ Why must Branwen bear this grief? And why must her grief kill her? These questions point to the apotropaic fantasies provided by gender. It is not incidental that it is Branwen's accommodationist position as mother which "compromises" her clan loyalties. This narrative implies that there is danger in mothers and their particularities. Maternal loyalties such as Branwen's might compromise the military

fortunes of a people at war, and this tale reminds mothers that clan obligations should outrank their particular maternal bonds. Branwen, as woman and mother, is the bearer of the individuality that threatens the fiction of the transcendent clan community, while Bran acts as guardian of this group, one that is understood to exist beyond the specificities of individual lives.³⁵

The doubleness of ideology at work here connects Branwen's character with the tale's double-edged construction of the Irish, just as Branwen and the Irish warriors were both connected to orality. On one hand, the Welsh scribe/redactor cautions against a too-rigid identification with a Celtic past. When, despite their perfidy, Branwen remains faithful to the Irish, steadfastly protecting the alliance with them, even pleading the Irish cause before her brother, the redactor seems to imply that her loyalty to this Celtic identity is overly rigid and that such rigidity can endanger Welsh cultural sovereignty, and even their existence. But the Irish also play the role of foreign power. They are the "foreigners" who imprison Branwen despite an alliance with them. They use her wisdom and double-cross her. The tale implicitly cautions against a naïveté in such intercultural affairs. Choose your loyalties wisely, the redactor seems to say, lest they destroy the very thing you hope to gain. Thus, this tale implicitly argues for a way of negotiating the border position of both Branwen and the Welsh author. On the border between its Welsh, oral past and English, textual future, Welsh culture must carefully prepare for innovations (in language and textuality) without losing its identity with the transcendental, transhistorical community it expresses. Within such a difficult position individual loyalties to the "ideal" group are especially vulnerable and particularities of loyalty are especially to be feared.

Branwen's death, while not altogether suicidal, is imbued with a self-hatred that refigures the guilt of the scribe who adopts an accommodationist position similar to her own. And Branwen's melancholic passing carries the pain and loss of those particular historical moments wherein English annexation eroded Welsh culture step by step. The transcendental "head of the king" motif protects Welsh compilers and professional scribes from coping with the losses that accompanied the accommodations demanded by empire. Branwen was sacrificed to the trauma of those accommodations.³⁶

Survival, Loss, and the Colonial Refrain

"The constant concern of the author of the Four Branches," writes J. K. Bollard, "is the modes of personal conduct which are necessary for society to survive and progress."³⁷ Yet the poignant attention in "Branwen, Daughter of Llyr" to cultural survival returns us not to progress but to the archaic

images of Welsh sovereignty through the figures of Bran and Branwen, figures imbued with loss. When it does, "Branwen" makes legible the archaic as an image of both cultural trauma and cultural survival. Unlike the opposition of an archaic past to a progressive future we read in Arnold's account, the archaic sovereignty to which "Branwen" returns suggests that the simultaneity of loss and survival haunts the accommodations of a colonial scene.

Postcolonial accounts of culture sever the links between survival and progress. They suggest, as do recent analyses of trauma and history, that repetitive and recurring fragments from the past might be read as evidence not of a regressive interest in trivia but of the intransigence of traumatic histories. Arnold's condescension toward the "residual" or "fragmented" character of medieval Welsh narratives obscures this particular traumatic history. Yet the "fragments" encoded in "Branwen" still can offer a reading of the compiler's efforts to preserve vestiges of an oral culture while accommodating the innovative literary technologies, the textual methods respected by imperial governments. That constitutes not a pillaging of antiquity so much as a response to a difficult moment of cultural transition.

When the memory of Efnisien's insult to the Irish inexplicably erupts years later to disrupt Branwen's marriage, we see a past pain that refuses redress, a loss that survives to return again. Linking survival with loss rather than with progress resonates with the postcolonial insistence that we eschew a progressive chronology.³⁸ And the tale, with its patchwork of fragments, its return to archaic images of the magical Bran and the desolate Branwen, marks the time of the colonial encounter not chronologically but contrapuntally: Loss and survival, Irish and Welsh and English, play over and through one another, simultaneous, distinct, yet related, of varying degrees of intensity at various times. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari recently have offered a way of thinking about contrapuntal and repetitive timing in what they call "the refrain," a notion indebted to musical time and birdsong.³⁹ The "refrain" is expressive and territorial, marking time through a repetition of sounds. Just as music takes over the space it spills into, with strains of varying intensity and endurance (louder here, fainter there), the refrain takes up space in time; it thus helps us think about time and space together. The notion of the "refrain" might help us think about the recurrence of the colonial scene in various times and places: in the eleventh and fourteenth centuries; in Matthew Arnold's nineteenth century; or in modern scholarly methods that continue to treat texts like the *Mabinogi* as residual vestiges of some vague archaic past. Such a notion might replace a chronological view of progress so as to cope with the repetitive compulsions of colonial culture.

If we hope to battle the recapitulation of the colonial demand in our own day, we need careful accounts of categories like archaic fragmentation, accounts that consider alternative histories and alternative uses of those imaginary structures. A postcolonial view of archaic fragmentation might even inspire sympathy for the apparent guilt of accommodationism, especially if, as in Branwen's case, it comes from a poignant desire to rescue another life. In its final episodes the tale of Branwen can, moreover, remind us the value of the particular, and the poignancy of its loss. It can suggest that when we hold particular desires and particular lives to be of less value than large, communal, cultural identities, we collude with the empire's insistence that parts are nothing but broken fragments, trivial details, expressing only narrow interests. "Branwen" can remind us that particular lives and particular acts do not deserve to be sacrificed to larger cultural or national wholes. We might recover Branwen's story so as to mark our time not with the lethal victimizations and the guilt she was made to suffer but with her ingenuity and courage in the hope of a more compassionate post-colonial future.

Notes

1. For an account of the reception of the texts of the *Mabinogi* following the "Romantic Revival" at the end of the eighteenth century, and for an account of Lady Charlotte's role in the publication of these texts, see Rachel Bromwich, "The Mabinogion and Lady Charlotte Guest," in *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays*, ed. C. W. Sullivan III (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 3-18.
2. Mention occurs in John Rhys, "Introduction," to diplomatics edition of *The Red Book of Hergest* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1887), ix-x; and in Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 51. See C. W. Sullivan, "Introduction," in *The Mabinogi*, xvii; Rachel Bromwich, *Matthew Arnold and Celtic Literature: A Retrospect: 1865-1965* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. 1. Patrick K. Ford has noted that "the notion of an antiquity pillaged has been more or less pervasive in Welsh scholarship" (p. 199), and he has been a staunch opponent of the implications of Arnold's view. See "Prolegomena to a Reading of the Mabinogi," reprinted in *The Mabinogi*, ed. Sullivan, pp. 197-216. On larger questions of how medieval studies recapitulates colonial disavowals, see Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).
3. Welsh scholars emphasize the primacy of Wales's relations to European culture as a whole; in their view emphasizing English relations can constitute another colonizing gesture, reductively viewing Welsh culture as derivative of its relations with England. I am grateful to Stephen Knight who first pointed this out to me. The European connection is, of course, also important to Renan's "Essai sur la Poésie des Races Celtiques." As my read-

- ing of "Branwen" will make clearer, I am interested in the colonial relations vis-à-vis Wales as part of a larger intercultural scene. Welsh/English relations need not be opposed to attention to a larger context. For a comparative analysis of the Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym and his near-contemporary Chaucer that suggests the European character of medieval Welsh poetry, see Stephen Knight "Chaucer's British Rival," *Leeds Studies in English* 20 (1989): 21-98.
4. These pertain to Arnold's more widely read *Culture and Anarchy*. My consideration of *On Celtic Literature* is everywhere indebted to Young's work. See Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (New York: Routledge, 1995), particularly pp. 55-89.
 5. Robert Knox, *The Races of Man*, p. 379, as cited by Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 72. As Young puts it: "In the 1860s anti-Irish prejudice was still rife in Britain, so [for Arnold] to advocate the accommodation of Celtic culture in any form was a radical move" (p. 72).
 6. Young, *Colonial Desire*, p. 71.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Ibid., p. 163. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125-33, and "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990); Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), pp. 271-313, and in *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1987). This approach has been challenged by Benita Parry and Chandra Talpade Mohanty for what they consider is a lack of concern for more materialist oppositional historical inquiry. See Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 36-44. Young sees their critique as "a form of category mistake": *Colonial Desire*, p. 163.
 9. Rachel Bromwich, *Matthew Arnold*, p. 1.
 10. I borrow this phrase from Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, editors of *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, who write "Post-colonial does not mean 'post-independence,' or 'after colonialism,' for this would be to falsely ascribe an end to the colonial process. . . . 'Post-colonialism' begins from the very first moment of colonial contact. It is the discourse of oppositionality which colonialism brings into being": p. 117.
 11. Arnold, *Celtic Literature*, p. 296.
 12. Ibid., pp. 296-7.
 13. Bhabha points to the prodigiously living aspects of a "national people": "DissemiNation," p. 297.
 14. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 40.

15. Arnold, *Celtic Literature*, p. 322.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 335, 386.
17. Indeed Arnold explicitly criticized the modern Welsh literary competition the *Eisteddfod* for its "literary cultivation of Welsh as an instrument of living literature," as "a fantastic and mischief-working delusion" (*Celtic Literature*, p. 297). Welsh writers have, to be sure, remained unconvinced by this aspect of Arnold's essay; the *Eisteddfod* continues to the present day.
18. The image of a fragmented Welsh will haunt the historiography of medieval Wales up until, at least, World War II. R. R. Davies has written "the basic presuppositions of English historiography, notably its . . . bias (all the stronger for being unspoken and unexamined) in favor of strong government, legal uniformity, and direct and clear lines of command and authority. Such a historiography finds it difficult to come to terms with societies which are institutionally fragmented, fluid in their frontiers, multiple in their loyalties, cultures, and laws." Yet "such," Davies writes, "are most medieval frontier societies": R. R. Davies, "Frontier Arrangements in Fragmented Societies: Ireland and Wales," in *Medieval Frontier Societies*, ed. Robert Bartlett and Angus Mackay (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), pp. 78-100.
19. Patrick Ford, "Prolegomena," p. 215.
20. The Red Book ms. dates from the early fourteenth century; based on philological evidence, the text itself has been dated from the mid-eleventh or late twelfth centuries. For the debate on dating, see T. M. Charles-Edwards, "The Date of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi," in *The Mabinogi*, ed. Sullivan, pp. 19-78.
21. For example, Juliette Wood, "The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature," Catherine A. McKenna, "The Theme of Sovereignty in Pwyll," Patrick K. Ford, "Branwen: A Study of Celtic Affinities," Andrew Welsh, "Manawydan fab Llyr: Wales, England, and the 'New Man,'" all reprinted in *The Mabinogi*, ed. Sullivan. For a review of the pertinent scholarship on Branwen, see Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, pp. 129-32, n 24.
22. Andrew Welsh reads the figure of Branwen as a "peace-weaving queen"; Patrick Ford suggests that questions of militarism are important to this text. Andrew Welsh, "Branwen, Beowulf and the Tragic Peaceweaving Tale," *Viator* 22 (1991): 1-13; Ford, "Celtic Affinities," p. 111.
23. The Welsh text is taken from Derick S. Thomson, ed. *Branwen Uerch Lyr*, Mediaeval and Modern Welsh Series, vol. 2 (Dublin: Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1961); quotation at p. 2. Translations are based on Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, *The Mabinogion* (London: Everyman, 1979; reprinted 1989).
24. Saunders Lewis identifies a triangulation of Irish, Welsh, and English concerns in the text. He identifies "British" interests with Anglo-Norman ones, reading Bran as a kind of double for Henry II. Lewis' concern with establishing the *Mabinogi*'s Welsh credentials (contra Morgan Watkins's *La civilisation française dans les Mabinogion*) contributes to his argument (as do

- his political positions on Welsh nationalism). His argument has been supplanted by T. M. Charles-Edwards' position ("Date," pp. 19-78). However, I agree with Lewis that this moment in the text positions Welsh sovereignty defensively, although I think it alludes to England as a common enemy of both Ireland and Wales. Lewis, "Branwen," *Ysgrifau Beirniadol* 5 (1970): 30-43. The implications of this for questions of cultural change will be clearer in a moment.
25. Edwardian conquest was to prove equally devastating; chronicle entries narrate territorial and economic losses suffered at the hands of Edward's "hosts" of military troops. See *Brut Y Tywysogyon, Red Book of Hergest Version*, ed. Thomas Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1955).
 26. For example, R. R. Davies, *Conquest, Coexistence and Change: Wales 1063-1415* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); David Walker, *Medieval Wales*, Cambridge Medieval Textbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Glyn Roberts, "Wales and England: Antipathy and Sympathy 1282-1485," *Welsh History Review* 1 (1966): 375-96.
 27. Pertinent histories include R. R. Davies, "The English State and the 'Celtic' Peoples, 1100-1400," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 6 (1993); and his *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change*; David Johnson, "Iolo Goch and the English: Welsh Poetry and Politics in the Fourteenth Century," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (1986): 73-98.
 28. Juliette Wood calls Branwen victimization a result of "xenophobia," (p. 65) and reads the calumniated wife motif in "Branwen" (a "folk motif incorporated into a literary work") in relation to the history of the treatment of foreigners: "Calumniated Wife," pp. 65-75.
 29. *Branwen Uerch Lyr* p. 9.
 30. Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi*, pp. 44, 45.
 31. The words are Wittig's as cited by Ford, "Celtic Affinities," p. 118, n. 33: Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structure in the Middle English Romances* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978). Ford disagrees with Mac Cana's reading of the fragmentary nature of the uses of Irish "sources" in Branwen; he argues that scholars must "begin with the principle of the integrity of the text" (p. 118, n 33). My reading attempts to link textual integrity to cultural innovations, and I would suggest that Mac Cana's discomfort with what he terms the text's "residual" character betrays Matthew Arnold's influence. See Mac Cana, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 50-51.
 32. Grifford Charles-Edwards, "The Scribes of the Red Book of Hergest," *The National Library of Wales Journal* 21 (1980): 246-56.
 33. From this view we could consider the "branch" "Manawydan, son of Llyr" for its explicit attention to innovation and an English locale. See Welsh, "Manawydan."
 34. *Branwen Uerch Lyr* p. 15.
 35. Maurice Bloch's anthropological account of Merina society argues that "traditional" (hierarchical) cultures cope with loss through a double figuration of death. The threat of decay of physical death poses to community

is split from death as a transcendent union beyond the grave. Bloch argues that women's cultural association with physical birth grounds their identification, in these societies, with physical death and bodily decay; this frees men to remain linked to transcendence, both "spiritual" birth and transcendent unions beyond such loss: "Death, Women, Power," in *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, ed. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 211–30. Julia Kristeva's identification of the "death bearing woman" with separation from the mother and with subjectivity in language suggests the implications of this for authorship: *Black Sun: Melancholia and Depression*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Klaus Theweleit describes as "or-phic [literary] production" a male author's need to imagine his own future as a continuation of the past while accommodating cultural, and technological, change. In this structure, the woman, like Eurydice, is sacrificed so that the male, like Orpheo, can accommodate innovation and, through the memory of his beloved, retain a coherent link to his past. Theweleit shows, through the history of Gottfried Benn, how such authorial structures desite and produce dead female bodies: "The Politics of Orpheus: Between Women, Hades, Political Power and the Media," *New German Critique* 36 (1985): 133–56. A more patient explication of these theories must be deferred at present.

36. Ford points to the possibility that Branwen and Bendigeidfran might be "one and the same name," although Branwen is clearly "the feminine form" while Bran clearly is "conceived as a male deity in Welsh": "Celtic Affinities," p. 105. We might thus read Bran and Branwen as a doubled figure for Welsh sovereignty, suggesting that the text's final split between Branwen's loss and Bran's recovery negotiates losses and recoveries for cultural sovereignty.
37. J. K. Bollard, "The Structure of the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*," in *The Mabinogi*, ed. Sullivan, pp. 165–96, quotation at p. 167.
38. Sara Suleri argues that colonial intimacies "dissipate the logic of origins, or the rational framework of chronologies," implying that if we are to read the historical thicknesses of a colonial past we may need access to fragments, and to apparently irrational models of time (p. 9). See her "Introduction" to *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 1–23. Anne McClintock argues that while "a good deal of postcolonial studies has set itself against the imperial idea of linear time," "the term postcolonial . . . is haunted by the very figure of linear development that it sets out to dismantle. . . . Metaphorically, the term postcolonialism marks history as a series of stages along an epochal road from "the precolonial," to "the colonial," to "the postcolonial"—an unbidden, if disavowed commitment to linear time and the idea of development" (*Imperial Leather*, p. 10). For a postcolonial reading of the timing of the "medieval" and the nation, see Kathleen Davis, "National Writing in the

- Ninth Century: A Reminder for Postcolonial Thinking about the Nation," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28 (1998): 611–37.
39. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); see especially "Of the Refrain," pp. 310–50.