Is there any critical purchase to viewing the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi* as a mythological tale?

The mythological undertones of the Four Branches have been a focus of scholarly attention for over a hundred and fifty years. In 1867, Matthew Arnold famously described the author of *The Mabinogi* as "pillaging an antiquity of which he does not fully possess the secret", utilising the analogy of a "peasant building his hut on the site of Halicarnassus or Ephesus".[1] Underpinning this view was the assumption that an ancient mythology unfamiliar to the medieval author was at the heart of *The Mabinogi,* with the extant text being a corruption of a more coherent original work. W.J. Gruffydd applied this idea to his 1928 study of the Fourth Branch, in which he aimed to "disentangle" the various influences on the tale in order to reach its "original form".[2] Similarly to Arnold, Gruffydd saw mythology as the foundation of the Fourth Branch and focused on its excavation. These assertions have since been criticised, namely for not appreciating the tales as they stand and overlooking the perspective of medieval audiences.[3] This has been amplified over the last fifty years during which synchronic readings of the tales as literary constructions have become increasingly favoured. However, the tale of *Math uab Mathonwy*, with numerous characters possessing magical abilities and clear linguistic parallels to pre-Christian deities, has continued to be the subject of such diachronic mythological studies.[4] Many of these works continue to make the same assumptions as Arnold and Gruffydd, and require further interrogation.

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[1] Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London, 1867), pp. 60-61.
[2] W.J. Gruffydd, *Math Vab Mathonwy* (Cardiff, 1928), p. 350.
[3] J.K. Bollard, 'The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion* (1974-75), p. 252.
[4] See John Carey, 'A British Myth of Origins?', *History of Religions,* 1 (1991), pp. 24-38.

The extant tale of *Math* survives in the White Book of Rhydderch c.1325-75 (NLW Peniarth MS.4) and the Red Book of Hergest c.1382-1425 (Jesus College MS.111).[5] However, an alternate ending can be found in Peniarth MS.112 c.1609-1621, which is one of John Jones of Gellilyfdy's many manuscripts.[6] The text reads, "Gwraig Huan ap Gwdion, a vu un o ladd ei gwr, ag a ddyfod ei fyned ef i hely odd i gartref, ai dad ef Gwdion brenin Gwynedd a gerddis bob tir yw amofyn, ac or diwedd y gwnaeth ef Gaergwdion (sef: via lactua) sy yn yr awyr yw geissio: ag yn y nef y cafas ei chwedyl, lle yr oedd ei enaid: am hynny y troes y wraig iefanc yn ederyn, a ffo rhag ei thad yn y gyfraith, ag a elwir er hynny hyd heddiw Twyll huan".[7] In this variant ending, Lleu is instead called Huan, Blodeuwedd is unnamed, and Gwydion takes the role of Math as the ruler of Gwynedd. Perhaps the most striking difference is Gwydion's creation of the Milky Way, which appears to be more mythological than the canonical version.

This essay will utilise this variant ending of *Math* to assess whether there is any critical purchase to viewing the tale as mythological. It will identify the problems in existing studies, and show that our most basic assumptions must be further interrogated. The first part will assess current arguments about the mythology in *Math*, questioning presumptions regarding borrowing from wider Celtic mythology, before moving on to consider the mythology underpinning the alternate ending. The next section will consider Jones' methodology as a copyist, and whether we can accurately date the variant ending. The final part will assess the value of diachronic

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[5] Daniel Huws, *A Repertory of Welsh Manuscripts and Scribes c.800-c.1800.* Vol 1 (Aberystwyth, 2022), p. 334, 741.
[6] Ibid., p. 382.
[7] Aberystwyth, The National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS. 112, https://viewer.library.wales/4525890#?xywh=0%2C-1776%2C3848%2C8231&cv=883 (viewed 24 March, 2025), pp. 880-81.

versus synchronic readings of *Math* more broadly, and whether the problems in mythological works on the tale are inherent to diachronic approaches. Overall, the main aim of this essay is to use the alternate ending of *Math* to show that studies of mythology in the tale can be fruitful. However, although Arnold and Gruffydd's works have been criticised for overlooking the extant texts and for ignoring the perspective of medieval audiences, more can be done to question the most basic assumptions about the transmission of external mythology into early Welsh prose which persist in current scholarship. Outlining such problems shows there is scope to sharpen diachronic studies of the mythology in *Math.*

Myth can be defined as the stories of gods and goddesses from an earlier time.[8] Part of the fixation on mythology in the Four Branches stems from the strong linguistic parallels between the names of many characters and pre-Christian deities. This is particularly pronounced in *Math,* emphasised by the fact that more of the characters have magical qualities in the Fourth Branch than any other. The relationship between Lleu and the Gaulish God, Lugus, is the most illuminating for our purposes. The linguistic connection between them is undeniable, with strong evidence that both Lleu and the Irish God Lug derive etymologically from Lugus.[9] Due to the lack of inscriptions for Lugus which survive in Britain in comparison to those for other deities like Epona, some scholars have doubted the existence of a widespread worship of the former in Britain, and therefore the feasibility that Lleu and Lug linguistically derive from Lugus.[10] However, such accounts overlook evidence in place names, for

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[8] Welsh, 'Myths, Folktales and Meaning', in J.F. Nagy (ed.), *Narrative in Celtic Tradition: Essays in Honor of Edgar M. Slotkin,* CSANA Yearbook 8-9 (2011), p. 264.
[9] Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth* (Oxford, 2016).
[10] Ronald Hutton, 'Medieval Welsh Literature and Pre-Christian Deities', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies,* 61 (2011), p. 72.

example, Carlisle derives from *Castra Luguvalium,* which translates to "the settlement of he-who-is-strong-in/like Lugus".[11] Although the evidence of inscriptions and dedications to Lugus is limited, this is likely due to the accident of survival rather than reflecting an absence of the figure of Lugus in Britain, therefore we can still confidently assert that Lleu's name does stem from the Gaulish God.[12]

Lleu is not the only character in the Fourth Branch whose name derives from a pre-Christian deity. For example, Gofannon son of Dôn derives from **Gobannos*, and it has frequently been argued that Dôn, the parent of Gwydion, Gilfaethwy, Aranrhod and Gofannon, as well as sibling of Math, was a female deity who was the goddess of the Danube and cognate with the Irish Danu or Donu.[13] However, there is no specific evidence that Dôn was female, and John Koch has shown that the phonology underpinning these assertions is not sound. Indeed, the British **Donū* or **Danū* instead produces ***Dyn* or ***Dein* in Welsh.[14] This highlights the issue that some scholars have over-emphasised links between characters and pre-Christian deities based on tentative evidence. The case of Dôn is an example of debatable linguistic evidence, however, more certain etymological connections to pre-Christian deities in characters such as Rhiannon in the first and third branches have also led to some questionable conclusions.

Rhiannon almost certainly derives from **Rigantonā* ("Divine Queen"), and Gruffydd connected her to the figures of Epona, goddess of horses and Matrona, a fertility

[11] Williams, *Ireland's Immortals,* p. xiii.
[12] Hutton, 'Medieval Welsh Literature and Pre-Christian Deities', p. 72.
[13] Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion* (Oxford, 2007), p. 243; P.C. Bartrum, *A Welsh Classical Dictionary: People in History and Legend up to about AD 1000* (Aberystwyth, 1993), p. 231.
[14] John T. Koch, 'Some Suggestions and Etymologies Reflecting upon the Mythology of the Four Branches', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium,* 9 (1989), pp. 4-5.

goddess.[15] There is strong evidence that these two goddesses were well-known, with numerous inscriptions surviving for Epona in particular.[16] The link between Rhiannon and Epona is viable, especially due to Rhiannon's entrance riding a magical horse, her punishment in carrying visitors on her back, and having to wear a horse's collar around her neck.[17] However, a key stumbling block in Gruffydd's argument that Rhiannon derives from Matrona as a form of a sovereignty goddess is that the former's relationship with Pwyll does not follow such a formula. In the First Branch, Pwyll was already the prince of Dyfed when he married Rhiannon. Furthermore, the existence of pre-Christian British sovereignty goddesses is in itself debatable, and there is no concrete evidence of such figures in the Four Branches or in wider medieval Welsh literature.[18]

Such oversights are often underpinned by the assumption that medieval audiences had knowledge of pre-Christian deities and their mythology.[19] It is problematic to assume that a medieval Welsh society which had been Christian for over six hundred years would have widespread knowledge of pagan figures which even by the twelfth century were ancient.[20] This ignores the contemporary context. The alternate ending of *Math* in Peniarth 112 further illuminates the problems with this framework. Although there is strong linguistic evidence that Lleu derives from Lugus, this does not necessarily mean that audiences thought of the Gaulish deity when

[15] W.J. Gruffydd, *Rhiannon: An Inquiry into the Origin of the First and Third Branches of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1953), p. 104.
[16] Jessica Hemming, 'Ancient Tradition or Authorial Invention? The "Mythological" Names in the Four Branches', in J.F. Nagy (ed.), *Myth and Celtic Literatures,* CSANA Yearbook 6 (2007), p. 87.
[17] Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (London, 1967), p. 225.
[18] Erica J. Sessle, 'Exploring the Limitations of the Sovereignty Goddess through the Role of Rhiannon', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium,* 14 (1994), p. 10.
[19] See Patrick Ford, 'Prolegomena to a Reading of the *Mabinogi*: "Pwyll" and "Manawydan", *Studia Celtica*, 16 (1981), p. 111.
[20] T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons 350-1064* (Oxford, 2013), p. 185.

hearing stories about him. In Peniarth 112, Lleu's name is Huan, linked to modern Welsh *haul,* and therefore not possessing any linguistic links to Lleu or Lugus.[21] The implication is that in some areas of North Wales in particular, there was a version of the story in which Lleu was not even known as such, further undermining the idea that we can confidently assert that medieval audiences across Wales consciously saw his character as parallel to pre-Christian deity Lugus.

The name Huan additionally helps us question the common argument that the shared etymological descent of Lleu and Lug is evidence that stories about Lleu were directly pulled from Irish literature about Lug.[22] This is part of wider claims which persist in scholarship that early Welsh literature borrowed excessively from Irish literature. In his work on *Math*, Gruffydd proposed that the tale went through six stages of development, directly borrowing and building upon Irish legends.[23] As Thomas Charles-Edwards has noted, there is merit to looking to Irish literature due to the comparative lack of Old Welsh literature which survives.[24] However, the assumptions underlying claims of direct borrowings have not always been sufficiently considered. We should question how and when Irish literature would have reached Wales, and how likely it is that Welsh writers directly borrowed from such tales. Although numerous scholars have since approached Gruffydd's conclusions with scepticism, many continue to support the idea that parts of *Math* borrowed from Irish or wider Gaelic legends. A tale like *Math,* with its numerous complexities, has particularly been the focus of such analyses, and many scholars have tried to explain

[21] *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru,* s.v. "Huan", https://geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html (viewed 13 February 2025).
[22] Bartrum, *A Welsh Classical Dictionary,* p. 464.
[23] Gruffydd, *Math Vab Mathonwy,* p. 350.
[24] T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Date of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion* (1970), p. 286.

the inconsistencies in the text through arguing that part of the supposed confusion arises from blending various traditions together, including Irish tales.[25] For example, in her 1989 article on the "lost" story of Dylan, Sarah Larratt Keefer argued that the tale originated from the selkie legends in Scottish and Irish folklore.[26] This is especially problematic as this folklore is only attested from the nineteenth century.

By contrast, Patrick Sims-Williams has criticised the idea that early Welsh prose borrowed from Irish literature in more depth, and has questioned the extent to which the author of the Four Branches, and Welsh literature more broadly, directly drew on the medieval Irish literary corpus. He has shown that there is little convincing evidence that knowledge of Irish tales was prevalent in medieval Wales.[27] Indeed, it is likely that there was some transfer of ideas due to the proximity of the countries to each other, however, it is very difficult to prove direct cases of borrowing, and as such, the possibility of these instances has been exaggerated.[28] Proinsias Mac Cana and others have suggested that transmissions from Irish to Welsh literature occurred through the settlement of Irish people between the fourth and sixth centuries in Dyfed and Gwynedd, the main settings for the stories in the Four Branches.[29] Indeed, there is strong evidence of Irish settlements in these areas through inscriptions which point to an Irish presence well into the sixth century, especially in areas local to *Math*.[30] However, proving that stories which appear in the Four

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[25] Carey, 'A British Myth of Origins?', p. 24.
[26] Sarah Larratt Keefer, 'The Lost Tale of Dylan in the Fourth Branch of *The Mabinogi*', in C.W. Sullivan III (ed.), *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays* (London, 1996), pp. 94-5.
[27] Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Evidence for Vernacular Irish Literary Influence on Early Medieval Welsh Literature', in Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamund McKitterick and David Dumville (eds.), *Ireland and Early Medieval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 256.
[28] Ibid., p. 238.
[29] Proinsias Mac Cana, *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr: A Study of the Irish Affinities and of the Composition of the Second Branch of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1958), p. 5.
[30] Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons,* pp. 180-81.

Branches almost six hundred years later is extremely difficult and perhaps unprovable.[31] John Carey has suggested that transmissions of Irish literature to Wales occurred in the ninth-century court of Merfyn Frych, based on evidence such as the *Libri euangelorium quattuor* manuscript which was copied by Irish scholar Nuadu in the second half of the ninth century.[32] Whilst such instances suggest an ongoing presence of Irish settlement and scholarship in Wales, notably in the setting of *Math,* making more assured claims of direct borrowings from Irish literature into the stories which appear in the Four Branches centuries later is nonetheless stretching the scope of the evidence. Taking this into account, it is evident that we should be cautious not to overstate direct borrowings from Irish vernacular literature in *Math.*

Such caution is supported by the alternate ending. As noted above, the shared linguistic origins of Lleu and Lug has underpinned claims that Lleu's story was borrowed from Irish tales regarding Lug.[33] Gruffydd went so far as to argue that the main myth which underlies *Math* is that of the giant Balor whose fate was to be killed by his grandson, Lug, and asserted that Math and Lleu were equivalent to Balor and Lug respectively as part of a wider theme of "The King and His Prophesied Death".[34] An obvious problem with this interpretation is that Lleu does not kill Math as Lug kills Balor, but rather the latter takes on a supportive role in Lleu's quest to undo Aranrhod's curse.[35] The main issue, however, is that it is based on the nineteenth-

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[31] Sims-Williams, 'The Evidence for Vernacular Irish Literary Influence on Early Medieval Welsh Literature', p. 239.
[32] John Carey, *Ireland and the Grail* (Aberystwyth, 2007), p. 126.
[33] Bartrum, *A Welsh Classical Dictionary,* p. 464.
[34] Gruffydd, *Math Vab Mathonwy,* p. 46.
[35] Rachel Bromwich (ed.), *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Triads of the Island of Britain* (Cardiff, 2014), p. 440.

century folktale, "Balor on Tory Island" in which Lug beheads Balor instead of famously killing him with a slingshot as he does in the older literary corpus.[36] Similarly to Keefer's work on selkie legends, Gruffydd argued that nineteenth-century Irish folklore underpinned a twelfth-century Welsh tale, which is evidently problematic.

The medieval stories about Lug exhibit a closer resemblance to Lleu's character than the later folktale Gruffydd used to point to the similarities between the two. Rachel Bromwich argued that the name *llawgyffes* ("skilful hand") ascribed to Lleu originates from the same idea of craftsmanship which gave Lug the epithets *samildánach,* meaning "skilled in many arts together", and *lámhfhada* ("long arm") in tales such as *Cath Maige Tuiread,* the *Dinnshenchus* and *Duanaire Fhinn*.[37] Carey has drawn further comparisons between Lleu and wider figures from Irish tales, specifically Cú Chulainn, by noting how both are at first denied a name, arms and a wife, and obtain all three.[38] There are further parallels between the story of Blodeuwedd and Gronw Pebr killing Lleu, and Bláthnat and Cú Chulainn colluding to kill Cú Roí.[39] Indeed, such comparisons between the two tales and the poem in the Book of Taliesin, *Marwnat Corroi mab Dayry,* regarding the killing of Cú Roí by Cú Chulainn, could suggest that some Irish tales were well-known in medieval Wales, and thus could have influenced characters such as Lleu in *Math*.[40]

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[36] Joan N. Radner, 'The Combat of Lug and Balor: Discourses of Power in Irish Myth and Folktale', *Oral Tradition,* 7:1 (1992), p. 144.
[37] Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein,* p. 413.
[38] Carey, 'A British Myth of Origins?', p. 29.
[39] Kenneth Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff, 1961), p. 107.
[40] Gruffydd, *Math Vab Mathonwy,* p. 266.

However, there are several issues with this interpretation. Firstly, as Kenneth

Jackson has noted, tales with the motif of the wife learning the secret way her

husband can be killed and sharing it with her lover, can be found outside the Celtic

context, and thus undermines the possibility that this motif was solely transmitted via

the story of Cú Chulainn.[41] This idea is close to the story of Samson and Delilah, and

as the Bible was a common source for medieval poets and scholars in both Ireland

and Wales, parallel stories could have emerged independently inspired by similar

episodes in the Bible.[42] Similarly, although both the stories of Lleu and Cú Chulainn

include episodes in which both characters search for a name, wife and arms, such

episodes are more detailed in Cú Chulainn, whereas in *Math* only appear near the

end of the text.[43] Sims-Williams has additionally cautioned against assuming that the

author and audience of *Marwnat Corroi* were familiar with Cú Roí and tales

concerning him, and proposes that the poem was part of the learned tradition

surrounding the legendary Taliesin.[44] Indeed, the voice of Taliesin was used by the

gogynfeirdd to show off their knowledge and bardic skill, and therefore extending this

display to include mythological figures from other contexts is reminiscent of

grandiose claims in poems such as *Kat Godeu*.[45] This cautious approach should be

extended to claims that the story of Lleu in *Math* was inspired by Irish legends

concerning Lug. Approaching both the names and stories as cognates rather than

direct borrowings is a more suitable approach, and accounts for the lack of evidence

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[41] Jackson, *The International Popular Tale,* p. 107.
[42] Ibid; Sims-Williams, 'The Evidence for Vernacular Irish Literary Influence on Early Medieval Welsh Literature', p. 255.
[43] Ford, 'Prolegomena to a Reading of the *Mabinogi*', p. 119.
[44] Sims-Williams, 'The Evidence for Vernacular Irish Literary Influence on Early Medieval Welsh Literature', p. 255.
[45] Marged Haycock, *Legendary Poems from The Book of Taliesin* (Cardiff, 2019), p. 10.

which can convincingly support the argument that they were borrowed into the Welsh context.[46]

The use of the name Huan instead of Lleu therefore emphasises the caution with which we should approach equating Lleu with Lug beyond the names being cognates. It subsequently raises the possibility that this version of a tale was one which may have been influenced to a greater degree by native tradition. This is particularly convincing taking into account the portrayal of Gwydion. As Bromwich has stated, "Gwydion's associations are entirely with Gwynedd".[47] Of interest in this regard is the reference to "Gaergwdion" (*Caer Gwydion*).[48] *Caer Gwydion* was referred to as the Milky Way by Gruffudd Grug in the fourteenth century, and Lewys Glyn Clothi in the fifteenth century.[49] Indeed, following "Gaergwdion" in Peniarth 112 is "sef: via lactua [sic]" in brackets, a note added by Jones which confirms its association with the Milky Way.[50] In Lewis Morris' 1757 *Celtic Remains,* Gwydion was described as being a "great... astronomer and from him the *Via Lactea,* or Milky Way... in the heavens is called Caer Gwdion [sic]".[51] This holds the implication that Gwydion was thought to have created the Milky Way, "in the heavens", which is reflected in the alternative tale. Indeed, it is described that "y gwnaeth ef Gaergwdion... ag yn y nef cafas ei chwedyl".[52] The quote from Morris was attributed to "D.J.", referring to David Johns who in BL. Add.MS.14,866 fo.129r (c.1587), wrote a note about Huan in the margin which referred to a poem by Ieuan Dyfi copied in

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[46] Sims-Williams, 'The Evidence for Vernacular Irish Literary Influence on Early Medieval Welsh Literature', p. 237.
[47] Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein,* p. 394.
[48] Peniarth 112, p. 880.
[49] Mark Williams, *Fiery Shapes: Celestial Portents and Astrology in Ireland and Wales 700-1700* (Oxford, 2010), p. 91.
[50] Peniarth 112, p. 880.
[51] Lewis Morris, *Celtic Remains* (London, 2009), p. 232.
[52] Peniarth 112, p. 880.

Peniarth 112.[53] It is likely that the alternative version of *Math* therefore draws upon this tradition.

As many scholars have noted, it appears as though there was an older and more extensive tradition in which Gwydion was a magician and "astronomer" than has survived.[54] A potential glimpse into this tradition can be found in the legendary Taliesin poetry. In *Kat Godeu,* Taliesin's own creation is reminiscent of that of Blodeuwedd and is similarly attributed to Gwydion in the phrase "Am svynvys i wytyon mavnut o brython".[55] In this context, the term "sywyt" in the line "Am swynwys sywyt sywydon kyn byd" also most likely refers to Gwydion.[56] The term "sywyt" has astrological connotations, and therefore the description of Gwydion as the "*sywyd* of *sywyds*" again emphasises the connection between him and astrology.[57] Similarly, in the *Ystoria,* as part of Taliesin's characteristic grandiose statements about being all-knowing, he states "Myui a vum ynghaer Vidion".[58] Both characters were therefore linked in terms of magic and learnedness, and Gwydion is consistently associated with cosmogony. Such connections suggest that not only was there likely a much fuller tradition of Gwydion as the creator of the Milky Way, but this tradition may have been much older than the extant texts. However, we should be cautious about overstating this idea. Much of the legendary Taliesin poetry was written by the *gogynfeirdd*, and both Gruffudd Grug and Lewys Glyn Clothi were writing in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries respectively. It may therefore be that the

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[53] Bartrum, *A Welsh Classical Dictionary*, p. 420.
[54] Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein,* p. 394.
[55] Haycock, *Legendary Poems from The Book of Taliesin,* p. 182.
[56] Ibid., p. 183.
[57] Williams, *Fiery Shapes,* p. 90.
[58] Patrick Ford, *Ystoria Taliesin* (Cardiff, 1992), p. 77.

connotations of Gwydion with astrology were a later medieval development rather than part of a wider, older tradition to which we do not have full access.

Regardless of when these mythological ideas about Gwydion developed, it is important to note that they are part of a native mythology. As has been noted, Gwydion is almost entirely associated with Gwynedd and therefore may be reflective of a greater native influence on at least one version of the tale circulating in North Wales during the medieval period. This alternative ending with Huan and Gwydion emphasises the caution with which we should approach the subject of vernacular Irish borrowings into Welsh, and suggests that such direct borrowings were rarer than scholars have thought. Similarly, as Patrick Ford has noted, even in cases where there is stronger evidence for direct borrowing, the notion of "community acceptance" still determines that exterior mythology will not be accepted into oral or written literature if it does not echo aspects of the native tradition into which it was accepted.[59] Sims-Williams' assertion that stories of Lleu and Lug were cognates in the same way their names are is therefore a more convincing framework and as the alternate ending in Peniarth 112 reflects, should reframe our view of Irish influence on both the story of *Math* and medieval Welsh literature as a whole.

The question which now follows is whether John Jones invented the alternate ending of *Math* which draws upon mythology associated with Gwydion, and if he did not, whether it reflects an older version of the story or a later medieval development. Considering Jones' methodology aids in answering this question. John Jones was a manuscript collector from Gellilyfdy, Flintshire, and had a long career as a copyist

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[59] Ford, 'Prolegomena to a Reading of the Mabinogi', p. 118.

spanning from 1603 to 1653.[60] Peniarth 112 was his sixth book of *cywyddau* which

he copied between 1609 and 1621, and by this point he had significant experience

as a copyist. He was diligent and meticulous in his methodology and copied

accurately to the extent that one *hengerdd* in Peniarth 111 has been used to

reproduce texts from the thirteenth century.[61] On the rare occasions that he did edit a

text, he noted the changes made, for example, in Mostyn 133.[62] This is especially

notable as the seventeenth century has often been characterised as a period which

was rife with forged manuscripts.[63] Jones remained committed to the integrity of the

texts even in the decade from 1613 during which he had limited access to new

manuscripts and was reliant on those he had already copied for intellectual

stimulation.[64] This is evident in the dictionary in Mostyn 131, which he rearranged in

1618 but did not change the materials he had collected in 1608.[65]

Such practices are important to note regarding the alternate ending of *Math.* The

manuscript was copied in two main periods between 1609 and 1611 and 1619 to

1621, the majority of which, including the poem by Ieuan Dyfi referencing Huan and

Gwydion, was carried out in the earlier period.[66] Written on the last two pages of the

manuscript, it is most likely that the alternate ending was added in the later period of

copying when Jones had access to fewer new manuscripts.[67] This suggests that

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[60] Nesta Lloyd, 'John Jones, Gellilyfdy', *Flintshire Historical Society Publications,* 24 (1969-1970), p. 7.
[61] Nesta Lloyd, 'A History of Welsh Scholarship in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century, with Special Reference to the Writings of John Jones, Gellilyfdy', DPhil thesis. (University of Oxford, 1970), p. 340.
[62] Lloyd, 'A History of Welsh Scholarship in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century, p. 340.
[63] Nick Groom, 'Forgery and Plagiarism', in David Womersley, *A Companion to Literature from Milton to Blake* (Oxford, 2017), p. 94.
[64] Lloyd, 'A History of Welsh Scholarship in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century', p. 336.
[65] Ibid., p. 291.
[66] Huws, *A Repertory of Welsh Manuscripts and Scribes c.800-c.1800*, p. 382.
[67] Ibid.

similarly to rearranging the dictionary in Mostyn 131 a year earlier, Jones added the alternate ending to *Math* to Peniarth 112 when revisiting his completed manuscripts. Throughout Peniarth 112, there are numbers next to the *cywyddau* written in Jones' later hand referencing later pages on which he added prose related to the poems. The number 880 is written in the margin next to Ieuan Dyfi's poem which references Gwydion and Huan on page 325, and vice versa.[68] It may be that while poring over the *cywyddau,* Ieuan Dyfi's poem reminded him of the alternate ending of *Math,* and so he added it. As a humanist scholar, this ending in which *Caer Gwydion* is mentioned may have been particularly memorable to him, as *catasterisms* were a focus of many humanist works.[69] The explanatory note, "sef: via lactua [sic]", and an additional note at the end in which he compared the story to "arddull y Groegiaid", emphasises this by showing an appreciation for classical learning which was central to seventeenth-century humanism, which may have supported his reasoning for adding the variant ending.[70]

Jones' commitment to copying texts accurately indicates that it is unlikely that he invented the variant ending of *Math,* however, does not answer the question of how the story had been transmitted to him, and in what form this took. The existence of several poems in addition to the couplet by Ieuan Dyfi which also reference different variants of *Math* show that Jones was not unique in having knowledge of a different version, and provide some insight into how he may have come across the variant in Peniarth 112. Lewys Môn and Tudur Aled, both writing around the turn of the sixteenth century in the North-West, included variations of the tale in their work. In

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[68] Peniarth 112, p. 325, 880.
[69] Williams, *Fiery Shapes,* p. 90.
[70] Peniarth 112, pp. 880-81; Kristian Jensen, 'The humanist reform of Latin and Latin teaching', in Jill Kraye (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 63.

Lewys Môn's poem, *I Wraig Gŵr Arall,* it is Aranrhod who takes the place of Goewin: "Arianrhod- ni bu'r unrhyw- ni byddai Fath hebddi fyw".[71] Similarly, Tudur Aled knew a version in which she was linked to Math: "Arianrhod oedd gariad-ferch i Fathon fab Mathonwy".[72] As poets, Môn and Aled would have been well-versed in both local and wider literary tales, and would have known the canonical version of the text as well as any variants.[73] It is therefore significant that they chose to reference alternative versions in their poetry. This may have been to emphasise analogies in their poems, but more likely reflects the version of tale most current to them.

It is notable that both poets knew a version in which Aranrhod took the place of Goewin, were writing around the same time and were both from the North-West of Wales where *Math* is set. It is possible that both poets were referencing the same story, which would highlight the suggestion that this was the version of the tale most widely known in the North-West during this period. With *Caer Aranrhod* playing a central role in the topography of *Math*, Aranrhod being related to Gwydion who is tied to Gwynedd and may have had a much more extensive native mythology associated with him, and Goewin appearing infrequently in the canonical version, it may be that a version existed in the Arfon area in which Aranrhod took Goewin's place and played a more central role. It may have been part of a longer variant which combined the ending known by Jones with Aranrhod also playing a more central role. However, this is speculation at best. Most importantly, these poems show that there were different versions of parts of *Math* known by scholars in sixteenth and seventeenth-

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[71] Eurys Rowlands (ed.), *Gwaith Lewys Môn: Casglwyd a Golygwyd gan Eurys I. Rowlands* (Cardiff, 1975), p. 347.
[72] Bartrum, *A Welsh Classical Dictionary,* p. 26.
[73] Gruffydd, *Math Vab Mathonwy,* p. 195.

century North Wales, ultimately supporting the notion that Jones did not invent the variation found in Peniarth 112.

It is notable that it is in Môn and Aled's poems that variants of *Math* appear, as these two poets were acquaintances of Jones' paternal grandfather, Siôn ap Wiliam, which may help to explain where Jones accessed the alternate ending of *Math.* Wiliam had judged a poetry competition at the Caerwys Eisteddfod of 1523 and had openly praised the works of Môn and Aled.[74] Wiliam, like Jones, had dedicated much of his life to collecting manuscripts, and many of the manuscripts copied by Jones were his grandfather's. Indeed, the first page of Peniarth 112 reads, "Llyfr Cywyddau Siôn ap Wiliam ap Siôn", suggesting that this book of *cywyddau* was one of them.[75] Wiliam's associations with Môn and Aled show that he was part of an intellectual network which extended across North Wales, and instilled his love for scholarship onto his grandson. We can therefore speculate that it is through these generational intellectual connections that a story such as the alternate ending of *Math* reached Jones in the North-East. Jones was also part of the network of wider scholars in his own day, with many scholars from Gwynedd and Môn bringing their own manuscripts to Gellilyfdy and Ludlow as Jones increased in reputation.[76] There were therefore several different avenues by which Jones could have been transmitted the ending with Huan, and it is possible that it was passed through connections established by his paternal grandfather, or his own network of scholars from the North-West.

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[74] Lloyd, 'A History of Welsh Scholarship in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century', p. 241.
[75] Peniarth 112, p. 1.
[76] Lloyd, 'A History of Welsh Scholarship in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century', p. 278.

Having established that Jones most likely did not invent the tale, and pointed to some avenues by which it may have been transmitted to him, the subsequent question is whether this variant reflected an older version of the tale, or a later medieval development. It is notable that he describes the tale in the note at the end as stemming from "yr oed y Brytoniaid gynt", suggesting that he believed the tale to be old.[77] Attempting to precisely date the story, however, is difficult. As has already been noted, references to *Caer Gwydion* do not appear in literature before the fourteenth century. There is a large corpus of Welsh literature which has not survived, which may have included legends about Gwydion predating the fourteenth century.[78] It may have been part of native mythology from before the composition of the twelfth century, which means the alternate ending of *Math* may have been circulating from around the same time as the canonical version. However, it is difficult to argue for this case with any certainty due to the lack of evidence.

The name Huan may provide further insight. The word itself is attested for the first time in the thirteenth-century Black Book of Camarthen in *Kyvaenad Keluit,* and in this context translates to "sun".[79] The first usage of Huan as a personal name, as in the alternate ending, appears in the poem by Ieuan Dyfi copied in Peniarth 112, which can be dated to the latter half of the sixteenth century. In the variant ending, Huan's name is utilised to explain the etymology of the word *tylluan.* As in the canonical version, Lleu's wife, here unnamed, is punished, in this version by Gwydion instead of Math, and is turned into an owl: "am hynny y troes y wraig iefanc yn ederyn… ag a elwir er hynny hyd heddiw Twyll huan."[80] In the canonical tale, the

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[77] Peniarth 112, p. 881.
[78] Patrick Ford, 'Branwen: A Study of Celtic Affinities', *Studia Celtica,* 22 (1987), p. 40.
[79] W.F. Skene, *The Four Ancient Books of Wales.* Vol I (Edinburgh, 1868), p. 504.
[80] Peniarth 112, p. 881.

author added the following explanation of the name Blodeuwedd: "Sef yw blodeuwed, tylluan o'r ieith yr awr honn."[81] This suggests that even in 1100, the word "blodeuwed" for owl was archaic. It is therefore striking that in the Peniarth 112 variant, Huan's wife is not called Blodeu(w)edd, and it is his name which is used to explain the etymology of *tylluan* through combining *twyll* with Huan. The onomastic element was transmitted as important in both versions, and it is possible that the characters' names were changed in order to provide a more updated etymological explanation of *tylluan*. The implication that the word "blodeuwed" was old in 1100 suggests that the alternate version could have been circulating even earlier, especially as *huan* is attested for the first time only a century later. However, in *Kyvaenad Keluit, huan* means "sun", and was potentially not associated with a personal name until much later, which problematises this idea.

Notably, the variant *twylluan* for owl is attested in the fifteenth century, two centuries earlier than Jones' book of *cywyddau*.[82] This could suggest that Huan became a personal name around this time, and that the variant ending developed around the same period. However, this is difficult to state with any real certainty. Attempting to date the variant ending based on Huan's name ultimately raises more questions than it answers. It is also possible that the material associated with Huan and Gwydion developed separately and were combined at a later date, therefore trying to date one element of the text does not necessarily help us to pin-point the date at which the variant ending as a whole developed. These elements are attested from two centuries earlier than Peniarth 112, but we cannot say for certain that this alternate

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[81] Ian Hughes (ed.), *Math uab Mathonwy* (Dublin, 2013), p. 20.
[82] *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru,* s.v. "Twylluan", https://geiriadur.ac.uk/gpc/gpc.html (viewed 23 March 2025).

ending developed around this time. This is likely, but it is also possible that it was circulating much earlier, especially considering the fact that Jones believed the variant ending to have been very old by the seventeenth century.

The possibility that the variant ending of *Math* was circulating around 1100 when the now-canonical version was most likely written down highlights the idea that the author consciously selected the elements of the tale as it stands.[83] Viewing the tale as the creation of an author appreciates its synchronic value, and links into wider discussions about the merit of synchronic readings compared to diachronic ones. Although the Four Branches are literary works, it is highly likely that various versions of the tales were circulating orally before 1100.[84] If the ending of *Math* in Peniarth 112 existed at the time, it is highly likely that the author would have had knowledge of it, as it has been well-established that the author of the Four Branches was most likely highly learned.[85] If we consider Sims-Williams' argument that the Four Branches were composed by a local man in Clynnog Fawr in Arfon, situated at the heart of the setting of *Math,* it is even more likely that variants of the tale would have been known by the author, especially those regarding Gwydion who is also entirely connected to Arfon.[86] Gwydion's character has impressive magical capabilities in the canonical Fourth Branch, however it is possible that his god-like ability to create the Milky Way was a step too far in a highly Christian context, and thus was not selected for the codified tale. Regardless of whether the alternate ending predates 1100, these considerations do however highlight that the same basic narrative of the tale

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[83] Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1992), p. 45.
[84] Brynley F. Roberts, *Studies on Midde Welsh Literature* (New York, 1992), p. 98.
[85] Mac Cana, *The Mabinogi,* p. 45.
[86] Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Clas Beuno and the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', in Bernhard Maier and Stefan Zimmer (eds.), *150 Jahre "Mabinogion" – Deutsch-walisische Kulturbeziehungen* (Tübingen, 2001), p. 111.

was told in different registers, and the author of the Four Branches consciously chose the elements in the canonical tale.

Such questions about the author's methods are central to wider synchronic readings of the Four Branches which focus less on the mythology which may underpin the texts, and more on the tales as literary creations in their own right. As previously highlighted, many scholars continue to carry out diachronic studies of the mythology in *Math* which are often based on tentative evidence. This raises the question of whether we should focus our attention on such synchronic studies of *Math* rather than continuing to search for its mythological roots. There has been a shift towards synchronic readings of the Four Branches, especially since the 1970s. J.K. Bollard's 1975 article, "The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi", was central to this change. He viewed the texts not as a distorted interpretation of an older mythology but as conscious literary constructions which reflected contemporary concerns through their thematic elements of feuds, friendship and marriage.[87] Such a perspective has led to illuminating works on *Math,* revealing much about the ideas of kingship, gender roles, punishment and relationships between characters which are overlooked in studies on its mythological elements.[88] These works show the benefit of keeping the medieval audiences in mind at all times when reading the text, as well as the literary nature of the tale.

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[87] Bollard, 'The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', p, 252.
[88] For kingship see Catherine McKenna, 'Revising Math: Kingship in the Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies,* 46 (2003), pp. 95-118; for gender roles and punishment see Roberta L. Valenta, 'Gwydion and Aranrhod: Crossing the Borders of Gender in *Math*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies,* 35 (1988), pp. 1-9; for relationships between characters see Andrew Welsh, 'Doubling and Incest in the Mabinogi', *Speculum,* 65 (1990), pp. 344-363.

If we read the variant ending of *Math* in this way, rather than focusing on the striking role of Gwydion as creator of the Milky War, we may be drawn to the relationship between Gwydion and Huan, and the former's determination to find the latter. Indeed, his commitment to searching "bob tir" and the "awyr" for Huan suggests deep care underpinning their relationship.[89] There is an additional layer of emotion compared to the canonical version due to the explicit description of Gwydion as Huan's *tad* which although is implied in the canonical version, is not directly stated. Similarly, it is notable that the punishment of Lleu's wife has been transmitted. This suggests that the idea of right and wrong and subsequent punishment was consistently a central part in different variants of *Math,* thus upholding the idea that the tale can be viewed as a critique of contemporary society.[90]

With synchronic readings revealing much about the construction of the tales, and many diachronic works appearing to undervalue their quality and make overly confident assertions based on uncertain evidence, this does raise the question of whether we should continue to carry out studies of the mythology in *Math.* Although there are clear problems in the assumptions made in many such studies, it would be equally harmful to ignore the clear mythological undertones of many parts of the text. It is difficult to overlook the magical qualities of many characters in the tale and the etymological links to pre-Christian deities throughout the Four Branches. Similarly, if we ignored the reference to *Caer Gwydion* in the variant ending, we would overlook another piece of evidence which points to the existence of a fuller native mythology of Gwydion. Similarly, some parts of *Math* are most likely older than others. For

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[89] Peniarth 112, p. 880.
[90] Bollard, 'Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', p. 252.

example, the word "maes" in the first *englyn* Gwydion recites to Lleu must be

considered a disyllabic noun due to the metre and rhyme, and is evidence that these

englynion may date from as early as the tenth century.[91] Some parts of the text,

therefore, do lend themselves to diachronic readings more than others.

Diachronic studies are not inherently problematic, rather the issue has arisen from

scholars excavating the tales for small signs of older mythology, making confident

assertions about such findings based on uncertain evidence, and assuming that

medieval audiences would have viewed the tales in the same way. It is clear that the

author drew on older mythology in *Math* and the other branches, however, as Bollard

noted in 1975, this was with the purpose of reflecting contemporary medieval

issues.[92] Analysing the mythology in *Math* can be illuminating, but the perspective of

medieval audiences should be kept in mind when drawing conclusions.

Overall, this essay has utilised the variant ending of *Math* in Peniarth 112 to identify

the existing problems in mythological studies of the canonical tale. It has highlighted

that although Arnold and Gruffydd's approaches have been critiqued over the last

fifty years in particular, many of their basic assumptions have not been sufficiently

interrogated. Most notable in this regard are the issues of direct borrowing of Irish

mythological literature into medieval Welsh prose, and medieval audiences'

understanding of pre-Christian traditions. Sims-Williams' caution in not overstating

the extent to which direct borrowings were made from Irish literature should be

followed, and the Christian nature of medieval Wales kept in mind when considering

parallels to pre-Christian deities in the tales.[93] Part of the issue in existing works is

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[91] Hughes, Math *uab Mathonwy,* p. 19, 103.
[92] Bollard, 'The Structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', p. 252.
[93] Sims-Williams, 'The Evidence for Vernacular Irish Literary Influence on Early Medieval Welsh Literature', p. 239.

the confidence placed in often unprovable evidence. Analysing the mythology of Gwydion in the alternate ending and attempting to estimate the date at which this version originated from highlight the fact that there are not many certainties which can be claimed about the origins of these texts due to the paucity of the evidence, and therefore we should verge on the side of caution.

There is critical purchase to analysing the mythology in *Math,* but not necessarily to defining it as a mythological tale. The mythology in the tale is not its central aspect, and as synchronic readings of the Four Branches have shown, there is much to be appreciated about the literary construction of these texts and their carefully crafted characters and thematic elements. These should not be overlooked by categorising *Math* as a mythological text. However, as analysing the alternate ending has shown, there are undeniable traces of mythology in both this ending and throughout the canonical version. These should not be ignored, as overlooking such elements could prove to be equally as detrimental as not focusing on more synchronic aspects of the tale. After all, the tales are set in a magical, pre-Christian world. The way in which we approach diachronic analyses could however be modified, with greater consideration of the basic questions at hand such as the possibility of external textual transmissions and the awareness of the medieval audience. Both synchronic and diachronic studies are ultimately searching for answers about the meanings of the tale, and ideally, well-rounded studies of *Math* should include both perspectives. However, more could be done in studies of the mythology in *Math* to further focus on the significance of such mythology in a tale which above all reflects the concerns of its medieval audience.

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