

Foreword

Joseph Falaky Nagy

The men of Britain are stymied. Having crossed over the Irish Sea to rescue their king's sister and to punish the Irish for having treated her cruelly, the British expedition, led by their gigantic king Bendigeidfran ("Blessed Raven"), finds that the Irish have retreated across an unnavigable river over which there are no bridges. The Britons ask Bendigeidfran (translated in Ford 1977:67; Middle Welsh text in Thomson 1961:11):

"What do you advise for a bridge?" "Nothing, except that he who is chief shall be a bridge." Then was first uttered that saying, and it has become proverbial. And then after he had lain down across the river, planks were placed across him, and his hosts went over-across him.

I propose that this episode from the twelfth-century Welsh prose composition known as the Four Branches of the Mabinogi (specifically, from the Second Branch) gives us much to think about as we undertake the pleasurable task of paying tribute to a pioneer in the study of oral tradition—and not just because John and his reputation, like Bendigeidfran, are so much larger than life. (I hope that in comparing him to a Welsh nemesis of the Irish I am not offending John's Gaelic ancestors.)

This passage exemplifies a trait of authors working in a milieu highly attuned to the performative background of an evolving literary tradition—the kind of milieu that produced compositions such as the Four Branches of the Mabinogi (a point made by Sioned Davies in her important 1992 contribution to *Oral Tradition*). Such authors are often very eager to trace the history of traditionally stabilized items, such as proverbs, back to a primal moment when they "happened" for the first time. Running on the mythological fuel of the character who says it, Bendigeidfran's verbal reaction to an unusual circumstance fast-forwards into the present as a set expression that people living and speaking long after the time of Bendigeidfran still quote and apply to a variety of quotidian contexts. The fortunate audience of the Second Branch are imaginatively ushered by its composer back to the "there" of a primeval world where giants ruled, and where it is possible to listen in as a proverb is coined and achieves currency. (Stefan Zimmer's 2003 study further explores the pedigree of this "leader as bridge" metaphor.)

Following traditional forms back to the world of their originating mothers and fathers happens to be a reflexive preoccupation not only of the early and medieval literary traditions that self-consciously grew out of and alongside oral tradition. The desire to recover that primal conception still informing an ongoing process also underlies the efforts of folklorists and other

toilers in the field of oral tradition studies. With his pioneering historical and bibliographical work John has set out for posterity the fruits of these studies in all their diversity and richness, making it all the more possible for us to appreciate both the deep roots in the past and the expanding future of scholarship on oral composition, performance, and transmission.

On another front, we have gained immeasurably from the comparative work John has done on the authorizing strategy familiar to us from pre-modern literatures and fieldwork reports—the syndrome whereby a tradition attributes a text, or a storyteller or performer attributes all part or part of his/her repertoire, to a spatially or temporally distant mentor. As a Celticist, I cannot resist mentioning in this regard the scenario attested in both medieval Irish literature and conversations collectors have had with Gaelic storytellers whereby the aged shanachie expresses regret that the scholar in search of traditional material had not come to interview him before his memory had grown rusty, or in time to speak with another tradition-bearer, even more knowledgeable than the shanachie, but no longer alive.

Having invoked one kind of deferral *topos*, I now resort to another, the application of which John's unusual productivity amply justifies. Where can one start to account for all that he has done for oral tradition studies? Like the overarching Bendigeidfran, John has overcome disciplinary and linguistic boundaries and led us into previously unknown territory, dramatically expanding our sense of the range of living laboratories in which the investigation of epic, ballad, lament, and other living genres of oral performance can be productively conducted. Crisscrossing the globe in his academic travels, contributing his research and ideas to fora dizzying in the variety of their locations and disciplinary foci, and creating an international journal that showcases the work of scholars so diverse that nowhere else would one expect to find their names listed in the same table of contents, John has laid the foundation for a network binding together a vast community of scholars. Were it not for their having met John (many of them in the context of the NEH Summer Seminars he has organized), being welcomed into this extended scholarly family he has helped to create, and crossing over the (now virtual) “bridge” *Oral Tradition* and its founding editor have provided, many far-flung researchers, thinkers, and innovators might never have realized that they have true soulmates who share their scholarly interests and goals.

As mentioned above, motivating Bendigeidfran and the men of the Isle of the Mighty to take up arms and cross the sea is the desire to rescue the king's sister, Branwen, who has sent an unusual SOS to her kinspeople (see below). True, Branwen's story may seem just a distant cousin to that of the unjustly calumniated Rhiannon in the First Branch of the Mabinogi, as well as to those of the calumniated Constance and patient Griselda, both stories high on the list of medieval “greatest hits” (Wood 1996:62-68). Branwen, however, is neither a faceless pawn of the narrative nor a passive “damsel in distress.” It has been observed that not only does her name *Branwen* contain the same key element as her brother's name (*bran*, “raven”) but that the modifying element in *Branwen*—the adjective *-(g)wen*, the feminine inflection of *gwyn* (“white, bright, holy”)—is perhaps a “native” counterpart to the borrowed adjective that does the modifying in Bendigeidfran's name: *bendigeid* (“blessed, holy”) from Latin *benedictus* (Ford 1987-88:105). Hence, it is fair to speculate whether at some point in the development of this story these two characters were twins, or originally one person whom the tradition split in two so as better to represent the contrasting values associated with this complex character-package.

Not going so far in Jungian fashion as to assign an *anima* to our honoree's *animus*, I would nevertheless propose that Branwen, like her brother, is good to think with as we pay tribute to John and attempt to describe all that he has accomplished. An outstanding attribute of Branwen's, one assigned to no one else in the Four Branches, is that *Branwen can write*, even though her story is supposed to have taken place in a time long before the introduction of writing into the world of the insular Celts. When she is being persecuted and suppressed by the dastardly Irish, who are enforcing an embargo between Britain and Ireland lest news of her imprisonment spread back to her home, Branwen alights upon the bright idea of writing a letter to her brother in which she tells of her plight. She also devises the equally remarkable ploy of training a pet starling to speak like a human, and teaching it how to recognize and find its way to her brother, to whom the bird subsequently delivers the letter, tucked under its wing. It is in response to her missive that Bendigeidfran assembles an army and a fleet. When these approach the Irish coast, it is only Branwen who can properly interpret what the Irish see from the shore. Although they have been treating Branwen with contempt, they know that she is the only one who can make sense of the bewildering and deeply troublesome reports they have received. And indeed, she can. Though it may seem to be so, it is no mountain or forest moving on the water, she explains—it is her gigantic brother and the masts of the ships bearing the formidable army accompanying him. After the British land and march across the barrier of the river, using (let us recall) Bendigeidfran's body as a bridge, it is Branwen who arranges for a truce between her sanguine and affinal relations—an arrangement to be ratified by the offering of a feast to the invaders-turned-guests. (Unfortunately, Branwen's plans come undone on account of the chronic deviousness of the Irish and the willful destructiveness of her half-brother, but these are sad matters better discussed elsewhere.)

Both as a thoughtful reader over the years of the myriad submissions that have appeared in the mailbox of *Oral Tradition* and as a researcher restlessly seeking new subject matter, John, like Branwen, can see the familiar and the orderly appearing on the horizon of our scholarly vision, in data that other editors might have found alien, obscure, or even downright threatening. Moreover, as a conference organizer of the first order, and a frequent invitee and regular participant at the yearly meetings and congresses of organizations such as the Modern Language Association, the American Folklore Society, and the Medieval Institute of Western Michigan University, John knows how to bring people on different sides of various issues together in a friendly and stimulating environment, so that they end up talking freely to each other and leaving with a commitment to stay in touch. Moreover, both under the auspices of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, founded by John at the University of Missouri-Columbia, as well as in less formal settings, John has demonstrated time and again that he and his wonderful better half Anne-Marie are experts in making guests feel welcome and giving them a very good time they are not likely to forget.

The Branwen analogy also hits the bull's eye in that John *can certainly write!* His natural gift for expression and his admirable resistance to indulging in the chronic academic habit of complicating one's writing or thinking for complication's sake have helped to create a body of work that conveys a whole world of ideas, methods, and information, and will continue to do so for generations of scholars, students, and readers to come. I like to think that, given the depth accorded the character of Branwen in the text's presentation of her, the letter she wrote was more

than just a plea for rescue—that it also offered an acute analysis of the situation and how she ended up in it. Similarly, as anyone who has sampled the extensive body of John’s publication can attest, there is so much more in his “letters” than the perfunctory academic exercise or the bald statement of supposed fact.

But, to return to Branwen, if she had gone to the trouble of teaching a bird how to talk to humans and thus presumably convey the message, why did the letter have to be produced at all (Lloyd-Morgan 1998:158-59)? Perhaps here, as in the passage discussed earlier which highlights the transformation of Bendigeidfran’s saying into a proverb, the composer of the Second Branch is showing that he is interested not just in telling the story of some extraordinary characters living in a primeval time, but also in saying something about the profound issues implied in the difference between fluid and fixed discourse, between the past as happening and the past as enshrined in hindsight, and between a talking bird that can fly over the Irish Sea and a letter that, to do its job, must stay put, affixed to the bird. We should note that the “oral” bird and the written letter are not dispatched in sequence but are sent off together, complementing each other and reinforcing the same message, imprinted upon each in a different way by Branwen, who is both writer and teacher. Perhaps it is with this dual accomplishment that Branwen and the author of the Second Branch of the Mabinogi convey to us the essence of what the story has to say: that writing needs an accompanying “voice” to reach its intended audience, and that communication—whether spoken or written, oral or visual—can never be completely stifled or robbed of its efficacy. We thank John Foley for having so eloquently and graciously taught us these same truths and expanded upon them so creatively in his writings, in his teaching, and in all his exercises of “word power.”

University of California, Los Angeles

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