

Branwen and the Cauldron of Rebirth

A retelling of the second branch of The Mabinogi

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One restless autumn evening, Branwen climbed onto the roof of her castle to ask the advice of the birds. Thirteen ships with blood red sails were approaching her homeland, and her brothers were gathering an army on the shore. Branwen, however, wondered if there was a better way to prepare for the strangers' arrival.

If you ever feel unsure, Branwen's mother had told her, then open your heart and listen to the wisdom of the birds.

Branwen stood tall and lifted her face to the sky. A flock of starlings rose from the woods below and flew up and over the castle, so close to Branwen that her long, dark hair whipped around her. For a moment, while Branwen was in the centre of the flock, the starlings' wings beat words into the air.

War! the starlings warned. *War will bring great sorrow!* Then the starlings swooped down, into an oak tree that bent beneath their weight.

The way to avoid war, Branwen thought, *must be through love and kindness.* She ordered a welcome feast be prepared, then walked to the shore to greet the strangers.

Branwen's eldest brother, King Bendigeidfran, was a giant, as tall and strong as a mountain. "Branwen!" he boomed as she approached. "This is King Matholwch of Ireland. He hopes to build friendship between our kingdoms."

Matholwch's eyes seemed kind, and his golden-red hair shimmered like sunshine. He smiled at Branwen, she smiled back, and something sparked between them.

Branwen greeted everyone who disembarked from the ships, and ensured Matholwch's horses, who had beautiful manes and glossy coats, were cared for in the castle stables.

The welcome feast was served in enormous tents, big enough to hold even the giant Bendigeidfran, and joyful celebrations continued for days. Branwen and Matholwch ate and talked, sang and danced, and slept beneath the stars. They glowed with happiness, and everyone was delighted to see love blossoming between them – well, almost everyone.

Branwen's youngest brother, Efnisien, sat grumbling like a storm cloud. He didn't want Branwen to fall in love and leave with Matholwch, and anger that she might do so was swelling inside him.

One morning, Branwen woke to shouting coming from the stables. Efnisien, in a fit of rage, had cut off Matholwch's horses' beautiful manes and shaved their sleek coats. The horses were huddled together, cold and confused.

"This is a great insult!" Matholwch roared.

"How could you be so cruel to these horses?" Branwen looked at Efnisien in shock.

"I'm angry because you're spending all your time with Matholwch!" Efnisien glared at Branwen, then stormed off.

Branwen tried to follow Efnisien, but Bendigeidfran lifted a giant hand to stop her. "Give Efnisien time. You know how hot-headed he gets."

"Efnisien must be punished!" Matholwch gripped the hilt of his sword.

"I won't punish my brother." Bendigeidfran shook his head. "But I'll replace your horses and give you gold."

Matholwch's hand remained on his sword.

"I'll offer another gift," Bendigeidfran suggested. "The cauldron of rebirth. It contains magic, bestowed by a Goddess, that can bring the dead back to life."

"That's a fine gift." Matholwch's hand finally fell from his sword.

A starling zoomed past Branwen's ear, and its wings beat a warning of war.

"The cauldron must never be used." Branwen frowned. "It only brings the dead back as mindless, ruthless warriors."

"I'll keep the cauldron safe, in my castle in Ireland." Matholwch held out his hands to Branwen and smiled, "I'd be honoured if you'd come with me, and make Ireland your home too."

Branwen looked into Matholwch's eyes and her heart swelled with love. She agreed, and later that day, Branwen and Matholwch sailed westwards, towards the setting sun.

For the next year, Branwen chased happiness in Ireland. She missed her brothers and her homeland, but she loved Matholwch, and when they had a baby boy, who they named Gwern, she loved him too.

Branwen enjoyed spending time with her new family, walking in the woods and beside the river near their home, and meeting new people. Branwen was kind and generous to everyone, and hoped to make friends. But it was difficult, because some people were unkind.

Branwen heard whispers, about how she was from a different land, and how her brother, Efnisien, had mistreated Matholwch's horses. One day, she heard someone tell Matholwch that he would lose respect and honour unless he punished Branwen for what Efnisien had done. Branwen said nothing. She didn't believe Matholwch would punish her for Efnisien's wrongs.

But Matholwch was proud and vain. He listened to the whispers, and ordered Branwen be locked in the kitchens, forced to work, and punished daily. The months that followed were awful, but Branwen held her head high and vowed she'd escape. At every opportunity, she went to the window to ask the advice of the birds.

One hopeful spring morning, a baby starling tumbled through the window. Branwen caught it before it fell to the floor. "Hello, little one," she said.

"Tweet!" the bird replied, and a plan flew into Branwen's mind.

All spring and summer, Branwen hid the young starling. She fed it, kept it warm, and talked to it. She told the bird about her homeland and her brothers. The starling listened, and grew strong.

When autumn arrived and the winds blew to the east, Branwen tied a note to the starling, kissed the bird's beak, and asked it to fly to her brother, the giant Bendigeidfran.

A few days later, something appeared on the horizon. Matholwch walked into the kitchen, looking worried. Branwen raised an eyebrow. It was the first time she'd seen him since he'd locked her up.

“What is that?” Matholwch pointed out of the window. “It looks like a mountain, surrounded by a forest. Do you see? The mountain has two caves, and a long ridge with a lake either side. And it’s moving towards us. How is this possible?”

“The forest is the masts of ships, carrying warriors from my homeland,” Branwen replied. “And the mountain is the head of my brother, Bendigeidfran. The caves are his nostrils, the ridge is his nose, and the lakes are his eyes. He’s too tall for a ship to carry, so he’s wading through the sea. He’s come, because I asked for his help to escape.”

Matholwch paled as the warrior ships reached the shore and Bendigeidfran rose from the sea. “They must not reach my castle!” Matholwch ordered the bridge over the river in front of his castle be destroyed, but when Bendigeidfran reached the river, he made a bridge of his own body, and his warriors walked across his back.

“Bendigeidfran will wreak havoc.” Matholwch trembled. “There will be war.”

“You treated me cruelly when I gave you only love.” Branwen lifted her chin and looked Matholwch in the eye. “But I will try to prevent war between our kingdoms. First you must free me. Then you must build a hall, big enough for Bendigeidfran, and host a feast. At the feast, you must give your crown to our son, Gwern, because you don’t deserve to be King.”

Matholwch nodded and stepped aside, and Branwen walked away.

Three days later, the feast was held. Matholwch and his people sat at a long table on one side of the hall. Branwen, her brothers and their warriors sat at another table on the opposite side of the hall. Matholwch and Branwen’s son, Gwern, ran and played between the two tables. Branwen had persuaded everyone to behave peacefully – well, almost everyone.

Branwen’s youngest brother, Efnisien, sat grumbling like a storm cloud. He was angry with Matholwch, and suspicious about some leather sacks hanging around the hall. “What’s in these?” Efnisien rose and walked to the nearest sack.

“Flour,” Matholwch replied from across the hall.

Efnisien drew his sword and split one of the sacks. An armoured warrior fell to the floor. “Liar! You planned an ambush!” Efnisien flew into a rage. He grabbed Gwern, the only hope of peace between the kingdoms, and threw him across the hall. Gwern’s head hit the floor and his eyes closed.

“No!” Branwen rushed to her injured son. Her fingers trembled as she scooped him up and tied him against her chest with her shawl.

Warriors surged towards each other and violence erupted all around. Bendigeidfran, worried for Branwen and Gwern’s safety, lifted them in a giant hand and held them behind his shield.

A battle swelled and continued for days. Branwen stared at the fighting in despair.

“This makes no sense!” Efnisien appeared at Bendigeidfran’s side. “I’m fighting warriors who fell days ago.”

“They must be using the cauldron of rebirth.” Branwen frowned. “This is terrible. Reborn warriors will mindlessly fight forever.”

Efnisien then saw how many of the warriors were empty shells, ruthlessly and relentlessly battling. Shame burned inside him. “Matholwch has the cauldron because of me, so I will destroy it.” Efnisien looked at Branwen with regret in his eyes, then ran back into battle.

Bendigeidfran suddenly fell to the floor, dropping Branwen. “My leg!” he bellowed. A spear had pierced his ankle and around it his flesh was turning grey. “It’s poisoned!”

Branwen looked from her brother to the raging war. Unsure what to do, she opened her heart and listened for the wisdom of the birds.

A starling flew down from the rafters and landed on Branwen’s shoulder. With a gentle wing, the bird reached out and stroked the top of Gwern’s head. Words formed in the air. *Claim the magic of rebirth from the cauldron!*

Branwen rose to her feet. She spotted the cauldron on the far side of the hall and walked towards it, calmly stepping around battling warriors.

Beside the cauldron, Efnisien was hiding amongst a mound of lifeless warriors. One by one, the warriors were being thrown into the cauldron, then climbing out, alive again, but angry and soulless. When Efnisien was thrown in, Branwen stepped forwards.

Efnisien's hands and feet smashed against the inside of the cauldron. There was a *creak*, then a *crack*, then a dazzlingly bright light burst out.

"Shield!" a warrior cried.

All the warriors hid behind their shields, but Branwen stood tall and faced the light.

The cauldron exploded with a deafening flutter. It turned into a thousand glowing starlings, that flew around Branwen so fast her hair whipped around her. Branwen gasped as the magic of rebirth, now freed from the cauldron, swirled into her.

The starlings disappeared and the reborn warriors fell. Branwen looked around and sorrow filled her. There were only seven survivors. Branwen could feel her son's heartbeat against her chest, growing weaker. And her brother Bendigeidfran was dying.

Branwen knelt beside him and put her hand on his enormous head. Magic glowed at her touch and Bendigeidfran's head lifted from his poisoned body. "We'll carry your head home," Branwen said. "This magic will keep you alive, so you can feast and drink and say farewell to our homeland."

The seven survivors and Branwen carried Bendigeidfran's head to a ship, and they sailed eastwards, towards the rising sun. During the journey, Gwern grew ever weaker. When Branwen stepped foot on her homeland, a tear rolled down her cheek.

"My heart aches for all that has been lost." Branwen lifted her face to the sky. "But I, and my son, will be reborn to fly free, and spread a message of love." Branwen opened her arms and she and Gwern turned into a flock of starlings whose wings beat words into the air.

Love! the starlings declared. *Love will bring great joy!* Then they swooped up and away, over the Kingdom.

The survivors built a monument to Branwen, at the place where she flew away. But in the years that followed, when they wanted to remember her, and how she held on to love and kindness through cruelty and war, they simply looked up into the sky and listened to the wisdom of the birds.