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CLOTHES TALK FROM MEDIEVAL WALES

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THAT clothing and politics are intimately intertwined should come as no surprise to any of us. Recent American political machinations make the point: strategists have long maintained that Nixon was defeated as much by his own dark suit as he was by what Kennedy had to say in their famous televised debate. And Barbara Bush's pearls held centre stage for a surprising amount of time in the 1992 presidential election. Even now it is difficult to say what seems so quintessentially Republican about them, but Americans would certainly all be shocked were Mrs Clinton to affect the style. Perhaps the most blatant example of sartorial strategizing occurred a few years ago in Washington state when, in what has been regarded ever since as the 'year of the political outsider', senatorial candidate Patty Murray adopted as her personal slogan the dismissive 'Mom in tennis shoes' label attached to her by her conservative male opponent. Waving the aforementioned footwear above her head in a news conference, Murray proclaimed her commitment to home and family and denounced her rival as 'just another suit'. That she was herself wearing precisely this same garment at the time just added to the delightful complexity of the imagery involved. Candidate Murray became Senator Murray: in that unusual year, the tennis shoes beat the pants off the suit.

What is true for the modern world was even more true for medieval and early modern Europe, where politics and performance were more closely linked than they are today. The cultural associations of clothing may have changed over the years, but its importance as a political language has not. Then as now, the wearing or exchanging of particular garments, like other (from our vantage point now unreconstructable) forms of political performance, was a potent method of expressing, reinforcing or enlarging upon social messages too complicated or controversial to speak aloud. The power and range of this type of communication should not be underestimated. Cultures invest the clothing they wear with their own unique perceptions of appropriate social, political and gender relationships; one has only to

contemplate the reasons why the slogan 'Dad in tennis shoes' would not have been adopted by Murray's opponent to sense something of the true expressiveness of the vestimental vernacular.

Medieval Wales was no exception in this regard. As those conversant with the Mabinogi and Arthurian tales will recognize immediately, changes in garb often accompany or denote transitions in the social status or moral standing of prominent characters. Pwyll's separation from the liminal world of the forest and his subsequent integration into the rituals and responsibilities of Arawn's court are proclaimed by the removal of his hunting garb (*gwisic hela*) and his donning of gold brocade (*eurwisc o bali*).¹ Similarly, his regaining of Rhiannon is signalled by the casting off of the rags that symbolized his temporary dispossession of her and the feast by which she was to be won.² In *Gereint*, Enid, who has arrived at the court in a linen garment (*leinwisc*), is reclothed in Gwenhwyfar's own garments as part of the ritual by which she is joined in marriage to Geraint;³ later her state of dress becomes a vehicle through which her alienation from his affections is proclaimed to all.⁴ And in the *Historia Gruffudd vab Kenan*, the series of battles by which Gruffudd comes to the throne is initiated by the gift of a shirt (*krys*) and a tunic (*peis*) made from the mantle (*ysgin*) of Gruffudd ap Llywelyn ap Seisyll, a former king of Gwynedd.⁵

But of the sources that address the issue, none is more revealing of the use of clothing to define and frame political relationships than are the *Llyfr Cyfnerth* and *Llyfr Iorwerth* Redactions of the Laws of Court tractate. This tractate is found in all of the principal versions of the lawbooks, Welsh and Latin. Huw Pryce has placed the redaction of the *Cyfnerth* version of this text in the reign of Rhys ap Gruffudd (d. 1197);⁶ the *Iorwerth* Redaction likely dates to the reign of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (d. 1240).⁷ As with all Welsh legal sources, the extent of the applicability of the tractate to real-life situations is uncertain. It is impossible to know whether what we are reading reflects what actually took place or simply what various redactors thought *ought* to take place. However, the more we learn about the lawbooks, the more clear it becomes that redactors were both knowledgeable about the princely court and often wrote with direct reference to events taking place within it. For all

¹ PKM 4.² PKM 17.³ *Ystoria Gereint uab Erbin*, ed. R. L. Thomson (Dublin, 1997), 17–18 = WM, cols. 407–8.⁴ WM, p. 209 (from Peniarth MS 6, part iv).⁵ D. Simon Evans, *A Medieval Prince of Wales: The Life of Gruffudd ap Cynan* (Llanerch, 1990), 29.⁶ Huw Pryce, 'The Prologues to the Welsh Lawbooks', (1986) 33 BBCS 151–87, p. 153.⁷ Pryce, 'Prologues', 155–8, on the prologues themselves; T. M. Charles-Edwards, *The Welsh Laws* (Cardiff, 1989), 20; Stacey, Chapter 2, above. This is not to say that this redaction necessarily reflects state policy under Llywelyn, however: Charles-Edwards, *Welsh Laws*, 38–9.

of its limitations, this tractate must be considered one of our principal sources on political life and ritual in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

What the tractate makes clear is that sartorial symbolism played an important role in the construction of political space in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Wales. Clothing is a prominent theme in the tractate — indeed, the text appears obsessed with the issue of personal attire. Mantles, shirts, shoes, hose and even dirty old rain-capes all make their appearance here. Not surprisingly, garments function first and foremost as markers of personal status, and were clearly one of the ways in which the relative ranks of persons engaged in similar occupations (grooms versus chief grooms, for example⁸) were distinguished from one another. Much of the interest of the tractate, however, lies less in the clothing people actually wore than in the garments they received as gifts or payments from one another. Thus are the king and queen said to provide livery three times a year to all court officers and additional garments to others on specific occasions.⁹ The court physician claims as his professional fee the bloodied clothing (*gwaet dyllat*) of any member of the court for whom he effects a cure,¹⁰ while members of the household bodyguard (*teulu*) are permitted to give their clothes away to others if their leader the *penteulu* permits it.¹¹ But most interesting of all are the ritualized clothing exchanges that take place during the three great feasts celebrating Christmas, Easter and Whitsun. For on these occasions, something very like a 'ladder' of claims and gifts is played out within the court: the doorkeeper (*dryssawr*) claims the clothes of the bard of the household (*dyllat e bard teylu*); the bard claims the clothing of the *distain* or 'steward' (*dyllat e dysteyn*); the steward claims the clothes of the *penteulu* (*guysc y penteylu*); and the *penteulu* claims the clothes of the king (*guysc y brenhyn*).¹²

The question here, of course, is what these exchanges were intended to mean and why they occupy such a prominent role in the tractate. Clearly there are practical aspects to the issue that should not be overlooked. Medieval clothes were worth money. They were valuable enough as commodities to be left in wills, and they often constituted an important part of a servant's wages. Thirteenth-century minstrels in England and France complained frequently about stingy lords refusing to grant them old robes as part of their fee. And contemporary almoners tried hard to ensure that nobles would distribute their old garments among the poor rather than use them to

⁸ WML 21.24–22.2 (= Cyfn 13/17) vs. 24.17–20 (= Cyfn 21/1).

⁹ Ior 2/4; WML 2.12–15 (= Cyfn 2/1).

¹⁰ Ior 17/5; WML 25.2–5 (= Cyfn 22/4).

¹¹ Ior 6/19.

¹² Ior 6/14, 8/4, 13/3, 19/5; WML 12.15–18 (= Cyfn 11/1–2). Note that the passage in Cyfnerth does not include the king. See also Lat A, D and E, where the *distain* is said to claim the *clamidem* of the *penteulu*: LTWL, Lat A 114.22–23, Lat D 322.21, Lat E 442.2–3.

reward unworthy hangers-on.¹³ Indeed, given the fact that medieval garments could be and often were cut up and reused, even the bloodied clothing claimed by the Welsh court physician as payment for his services was likely of greater financial value than one might be tempted to assume.

Of course the fact that a gift is practical or mandated by circumstance does not rule out its potential significance as a social statement. Livery is both practical and political, in that it provides an officer with something to wear while proclaiming his allegiance to the lord who provided it. Moreover, like any other uniform, it has the effect of suppressing potentially disruptive personal identities or alliances while proclaiming a commonality of political outlook that may in truth be quite fragile. Similarly, while our Welsh doctor might benefit financially from spoiled but reusable clothing, he stood to profit equally from the political message implicit in his claiming it in the first place. For blood clothing of this sort was taken only from those members of the court whom his status as court physician obliged him to treat free of charge; it was, in other words, as forthright a statement about the court affiliations of donor and recipient as was livery itself. Garments are conceptualized in this tractate not merely as payments for services rendered, or even as expressions of individual status. Their primary importance lies in their role as symbols of a public and highly political identity rooted specifically in the court, and this is, I would suggest, the reason why the text focuses more on the movement of garments within this space than it does on the actual wearing of them.

That the political imagery involved in clothing exchanges is more subtle even than has been outlined so far is suggested by the progression of claims and gifts made at the three great feasts. It must be stressed that the hierarchy established in this series of gifts — king, *penteulu*, steward, *bardd teulu* and doorkeeper — does not reproduce hierarchies outlined elsewhere in the tractate. The pattern established for clothing does not replicate that articulated with respect to food, drink or other types of gift mentioned in the text. There is no obvious reason why a doorkeeper would expect gifts from the bard, or why the bard would look to the steward rather than to the *penteulu* for remuneration. Nor is it ever made clear why these officers only out of the twenty-four listed in the tractate would be grouped together in this way. The key to this progression remains a mystery.

In order to get at the meaning of this series of gifts it is necessary to examine more closely the context within which it occurs. The first and most

¹³ Margaret Wade Labarge, *A Baronial Household of the Thirteenth Century* (London, 1965), 131; Kate Mertes, *The English Noble Household 1250–1600* (Oxford, 1988), 45, 103 and 132; Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c.1200–1520* (Cambridge, 1989; repr. 1990), 78–9, 88–9, 175–7, and 205–7; P. R. Coss, *Lordship, Knighthood and Locality: A Study in English Society c.1180–c.1280* (Cambridge, 1991), 173.

basic point is that the giving of clothing in the context of a great feast was by no means unique to Wales. Such gifts were already a long established part of noble feasting traditions in England and on the continent.¹⁴ Hospitality and the distribution of largesse were much of the point of any great feast, and it seems unlikely that the Welsh would have been very different in this regard. The Welsh may have borrowed the idea of ritualized or sequential garment exchange from contemporary English or continental practice; the progression outlined above may be yet another instance of the well documented practice of Welsh princes modelling their patterns of rule on those of their European contemporaries.¹⁵ If so, however, the sequence itself seems likely to be native. I have found no parallel progressions elsewhere: when Simon de Montfort as steward handed his robe over at the end of Henry III's marriage feast in 1236, he gave it to the master cook.¹⁶

The second point to be made is that feasts were themselves highly charged political occasions. European rulers regularly used feasts as public platforms from which to proclaim and perform the political unity of their realms. Frequently feasts functioned as occasions for royal crown wearings; they were also a common venue for public acts of submission by political opponents.¹⁷ But festivals of unity all too often become flashpoints for rebellion — perhaps in part because such events bring together under one roof parties not normally well disposed to one another. In December of 1241, John's widowed queen Isabella of Angoulême and her new husband Hugh de Lusignan left Louis IX's Christmas court at Poitiers in a huff, to go and start a rebellion. They claimed that Isabella had been treated at the event in a manner ill-befitting a former queen, and they may well have been right. They were certainly angry: Hugh burned down the house in which they had been

¹⁴ Achille Luchaire, *Social France at the Time of Philip Augustus*, tr. E. B. Krehbiel from the 2nd French edn. of 1909 (1912; repr. 1967), 339; Labarge, *A Baronial Household*, pp. 130–131.

¹⁵ As the changes made by the *Llyfr Iorwerth* redactor to the earlier seating arrangements outlined in *Llyfr Cyfnerth* seem likely to be: compare WML 4.6–11 with Ior 5/1–8. On the symbolism implicit in the earlier arrangements, and for Irish parallels, see T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Heir-Apparent in Irish and Welsh Law', (1971) 9 *Celtica* 180–90.

¹⁶ Labarge, *Baronial Household*, 131. After Eleanor of Provence's coronation feast, the butler Master Michael received the earl's dress, which he in turn gave to one of his relatives who served the king during the rest of the year; the queen's chamberlain, in the mean time, received the entirety of the queen's bed for his service: *English Coronation Records*, ed. Leopold G. Wickham Legg (Westminster, 1901), 64–5.

¹⁷ William the Conqueror wore his crown at all three of the principal feasts of the Christian year. The principal rivals of the German Emperor Otto I took leading roles in organizing and serving the banquet that followed his coronation in 936: Widukind of Corvey, *Rerum Gestarum Saxoniarum Libri tres*, ed. G. Waitz et al., in *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum*, 63–7. On European feasting rituals and the political significance of such occasions, see Karl Hauck, 'Rituelle Speisegemeinschaft im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert', (November 1950) 3/11 *Studium Generale* 611–21.

staying before they left.¹⁸ Occasionally feasts formed part of the language of rebellion, as in 1002 when a disappointed contender for the German throne seized and publicly consumed a feast intended for others as a means of proclaiming his continued candidacy for the throne.¹⁹ That feasts played a similarly political role in medieval Wales cannot seriously be doubted. The chronicles make clear that revolts and political murders often occurred in conjunction with feasts and, given the strategic significance of the celebration hosted by the Lord Rhys in 1176, it is not difficult to see why. Certainly it was no coincidence that when Llywelyn ap Gruffudd went to London in 1277 to render homage to the English king, he did so at Christmas.²⁰

Feasts both celebrated and rendered vulnerable the princely authority they were designed to manifest. Loyalties and rivalries alike were on display, and containing these energies must have been a tricky process indeed. Moreover, the possibility of private intrigues and alliances developing within the hall must have been considerably heightened by the princely posturing that was in many ways the main purpose of such occasions. The *Iorwerth* tractate suggests that gifts of clothing may have played an important role in the formation of such alliances. This is why prohibitions are placed in the text on spontaneous or unrestrained giving by powerful individuals: why members of the bodyguard were not allowed to give their clothing away to others without the *penteulu*'s permission, and why the *edling*, as heir and possible rival to the king, was not allowed to give his clothing away at all except at the king's direction.²¹ Clothes could resculpt political identities at a single glance — indeed, given the relative infrequency with which they were changed in this period, many garments would likely have been well-known to others and have carried their history with them from one setting to the next. The tunic received by Gruffudd ap Cynan was powerful because it had been made from the mantle (*ysgin*) of a former king of Gwynedd.²²

¹⁸ The issue was Louis's son Alphonse's investiture as count of Poitou, which represented the extension of Capetian power into an area over which the Lusignans were attempting to retain their control. The revolt was probably inevitable in any case, but the fact that it started then, fully five months before Henry III (a co-conspirator with the Lusignans, as he was trying to recover Poitou) was ready, suggests that it was the feast itself that sparked it off early — which is what Isabella herself claimed also. French chroniclers attributed the timing of the revolt to her excessive pride: Robert Stacey, *Politics, Policy and Finance under Henry III* (Oxford, 1987), 182–5. Another example would be that of the count of Aumale, who in 1220 left Henry's Christmas court in the middle of the night to initiate a revolt: D. A. Carpenter, *The Minority of Henry III* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), 227–34.

¹⁹ Leyser, *Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society: Ottonian Saxony* (Bloomington, IN, 1979), 94.

²⁰ For example, ByT (RBH), years 1105–9, pp. 54–65. The court of the Lord Rhys is described at year 1176, pp. 166–7; Llywelyn's trip to London can be found at year 1277, pp. 264–9.

²¹ Ior 4/17; 6/19.

²² D. Simon Evans, *Medieval Prince of Wales*, 29.

The clothing exchanges outlined in the Laws of Court tractate were, I suggest, an important part of the process by which such intrigues were confronted and contained. Mandating the recipient of the garments worn by *penteulu* and steward had in the first place the very practical effect of neutralizing some of the alliance-making capacities of these two very powerful individuals. But the sequence²³ of gifts itself also functioned within the hall as a dramatic enactment of the unity of court and realm. For while this progression makes little sense on its own, when viewed as a performance taking place within the court, it becomes a powerful dramatization of the political relationships in which princely dominion was rooted. We know from Iorwerth that medieval Welsh feasting halls were divided into upper and lower precincts: the king and the *distain* were associated with the upper precinct of the court, and the *penteulu* and bard with the lower.²⁴ In other words, those involved in the exchange had physically to cross the boundary between one precinct and the other, from upper to lower and back again.

The symbolism of this action is complex. As Thomas Charles-Edwards has pointed out, the *penteulu* and the steward were symbols of the military and domestic aspects of princely rule: clothing exchanges between these two thus dramatized the unity of court and warband.²⁵ But I would suggest that there are additional, more politically pointed aspects to this ritual. Apart perhaps from the *edling*,²⁶ the king, the steward, the *penteulu* and the bard were the four most politically charged figures in the court. The *penteulu* himself was of royal blood and was therefore a potential (if temporarily ineligible) rival for the throne: Iorwerth defines him as the son or nephew of the king.²⁷ The *distain* of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries was, as David Stephenson's work has made clear, not a domestic bursar but the king's main political adviser and his principal agent in judicial and military matters.²⁸ Bards were viewed as inherently political because of their role in war. Part of the duties of a *bardd teulu* was to sing *Unbeynnyath Prydeyn* (The Sovereignty of Britain) while the warband was fighting (or, according to Iorwerth, sharing out proceeds from a

²³ The texts do not tell us whether these exchanges would have taken place all at one time or at different points during the evening. The dramatic effect would doubtless have been heightened by a series of sequential exchanges; the political message would be the same in either case.

²⁴ Ior 5/1: *ys coryf* and *uwch coryf*. The *distain* does not have a fixed seat in the hall because he serves at the three great feasts; however, Ior 8/12–13 makes clear that he is in charge in the upper half, while the *penteulu* is in charge in the lower (Ior 6/12–13, 16; WML 10.20–11.3, 11.6–9).

²⁵ T. M. Charles-Edwards, Chapter 14.

²⁶ Who, as I have argued in Chapter 2, is very deliberately set apart from the court in the Iorwerth version of the tractate.

²⁷ Ior 6/1.

²⁸ David Stephenson, *The Governance of Gwynedd* (Cardiff, 1984), 11–20. T. Jones Pierce argued that over time the *distain* replaced the *penteulu* as a leader in military affairs: *Medieval Welsh Society: Selected Essays by T. Jones Pierce*, ed. J. Beverley Smith (Cardiff, 1972), 34.

raid); it is certainly no accident that the *pencerdd* is said in Iorwerth to lodge with the *edling*, and the bard of the warband with the *penteulu*.²⁹

The ritual thus incorporates the most politically powerful — and potentially volatile — members of the court. It also proceeds according to the social scale, from king to *penteulu* (a member of the royal family) to *distain* to bard to doorkeeper.³⁰ The progression of claims and gifts would thus have proceeded both horizontally — back and forth across the hall — and vertically — up or down the social scale between the officers in each precinct. We are not told who initiated the sequence — *penteulu* or doorkeeper — but the point in either case is the same. In the formal presentation of claims and gifts is recreated in dramatic form the system of obligations and rewards that linked officers to one another and to their prince. The interchangeability of the public attire of prominent figures asserts the essential unity of political identities and attitudes within the realm. And the movement of persons from one precinct to another constructs for and around the audience a uniquely political space the dimensions of which, like the social bonds of which it was comprised, were both lateral and hierarchical. The key symbol in all of this is the hall, the symbolic microcosm in which the realm as a whole is encapsulated. This, I suggest, is why the doorkeeper stands at either end of the process: he occupies here the position filled by the porter³¹ in mythological texts like *Culhwch ac Olwen* — the person who in standing guard over court and hall protects the integrity of the kingdom itself.

These clothing exchanges are conceptualized in the tractate as claims made by office-holders on those superior to them in rank rather than as spontaneous personal gifts. This is significant, since claims of this sort, unlike gifts given freely by members of the bodyguard for example, are by definition rooted in service to court and prince. Theorists of secular ritual have remarked that rituals designed to suppress dissent often frame potentially disruptive events with formal ceremonial structures that render manifest the contrast between the stability of the status quo and the fragility of the forces that threaten it.³² Such is clearly the case in this instance. Not only does the formal progression of claims and gifts across the hall contextualize and diminish such impromptu giving as may occur, the longevity and power of the relationships thus enacted is underscored by the giving of royal livery and,

²⁹ WML 22.17–19; Ior 13/7. For lodging, see WML 9.17–18; Ior 13/9; 40/8.

³⁰ This is not of course to say that it reproduces the entirety of the social hierarchy of the court: there are other, less politically charged officers who would outrank the bard, for example, and who are not included in this ritual.

³¹ In fact one manuscript actually reads *porhawr* here: BL Cotton MS Cleopatra B v; saec. XIV (Cyfn X). In the Irish *Cath Maige Tuired*, where the hall is also very clearly a symbol for the kingdom itself, this position is filled by the *dorsaid*, 'doorkeeper'.

³² Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff (eds.), *Secular Ritual* (Amsterdam, 1977), 3–24, 131–4, 200–2.

ultimately, by the rhythm and permanence of the Christian year. Because ritual is such a potent forum in which to communicate messages as if they are not open to question, it is an excellent manner in which to persuade an audience of that which is most in doubt.³³ In twelfth- and thirteenth-century Wales, what was doubted most was also what mattered most: the unity, cohesiveness and freedom from outside intrusion of native Welsh courts. These are the uncertainties to which the clothing exchanges described in these texts speak so eloquently.

Much of what I have pointed to here — most notably, the centrality of the hall as a political metaphor, and the role of clothing exchanges in constructing and dramatizing relationships within that symbolic space — are paralleled elsewhere in the Laws of Court tractate. Thus is *Llyfr Iorwerth's* relegation of the queen to an explicitly apolitical position within the court communicated both by her virtual exclusion from the hall in that text and by the stark distinction drawn between the livery she gives and that given by her husband. For while the king is said to be the source of the woollen outergarments by which the political affiliations of his officers are made known, the queen is depicted as the giver of undergarments and as therefore influential only in that part of the court which is private and hidden from public view.³⁴ The language of garments is an old one, and it is one of great power. Clothes talk is political talk — as will be evident to anyone who has at some point in their lives been 'invested' with the 'mantle of authority'.

³³ Ibid., 23–4.

³⁴ *Llyfr Cyfnerth* and the Latin Redactions also maintain this distinction between the public (male) and private (female) spheres, although in a less developed form: see Chapter 2 above.