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The Humour in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*

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It is generally accepted that *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* can be read as a parodying satire; however, the text is often taken so seriously that critics appear in danger of forgetting that this piece of Middle Welsh prose is actually humorous. As the object of the text's satire continues to be debated, the mechanics underlying the comic effect are neglected in favour of an attempt to present a rational explanation of the text, which, ironically, is the very last thing the narrative offers. Leaving aside the issues of dating *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* and establishing a precise 'meaning', this paper seeks to illustrate the nature of the humour presented in the text, how it is achieved and how it operates within the narrative to produce a destabilizing effect which is both comic and serious in that it problematizes literature and language as agents of 'truth'.¹

In the introduction to his edition of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, Melville Richards outlines his interpretation of the 'tale': 'Holl arwyddocâd y *Breuddwyd* yw'r pwyslais a roddir ar y gwahaniaeth dirfawr rhwng bychander oes yr awdur a gogoniant yr oes a fu, rhwng y 'dynion bychain' a'r arwyr Arthuraidd enfawr.'² What Richards describes as the characteristic of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* fits a broad definition of satire popular since the 1960s, as a genre which uses wit and ridicule to attack the vice and folly of others by making them seem ridiculous or reprehensible. Though satire (unlike pure rhetoric) uses exaggeration and fiction, its 'victims' come from the 'real world' and there is a clear moral purpose to the sharp wit used.³ This generalization of satire agrees with those aspects of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* that Richards highlights such as the use of ridicule, rhetoric, genuine historical characters and the suggestion of a moral purpose. However, this identification of its satiric intention simplifies many of the complexities that make *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* interesting, and the 'meaning' of the text so elusive. Such simple and general assumptions about the nature of satire inevitably lead to a negative view of the genre, as Dustin Griffin suggests: 'Satire in fiction is said to be detectable in a certain flattening of character towards caricature, a stylising of action toward the emblematic, a reductive sharpening of narrative tone toward ridicule, and what Mikhail Bakhtin would call 'monological' discourse.'⁴

¹ This paper is based on selected passages taken from my unpublished M.Phil dissertation, 'Texts with an agenda: satire and comedy in medieval Welsh prose', University of Wales, Bangor, 2001. I would sincerely like to thank the Department of Welsh at Bangor, especially Dafydd Glyn Jones, for his guidance and inspiration in the preparation of the M.Phil., and friends in the Department of Welsh and Celtic Studies at Aberystwyth, for their helpful observations

in the preparation of this paper.

² Melville Richards (ed.), *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* (Cardiff, 1948), pp. xxxviii–xxxix. All references to the text will be to this edition. Those needing an English translation should refer to G. Jones and T. Jones, *The Mabinogion* (London, 1949; reprinted and revised, 1996).

³ Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Kentucky, 1994), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

The interpretation offered by Thomas Parry suggests that the satire in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* includes parody in the form of 'y darlun hwn o Arthur, y dychanu ar wŷr ac arferion yr oes, y lliwiau helaeth a osodir yn beiriannol'.⁵ The problem with this interpretation is that it confirms the view that the genre is 'irredeemably lightweight and second order: in a more hostile vocabulary, . . . trivial and parasitic'.⁶ Such traditional accounts of parody and satire reduce texts to members of predictable and formulaic genres, marking the narratives as 'not very interesting, not very good', and at best only inducing 'easy laughter'.⁷ *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* does not induce 'easy laughter' for the simple reason that the humour is dark and complex and the elements of satire and parody evade straightforward generalization. That is, if the narrative satirizes twelfth-century contemporaries by comparing them with the glories of Arthur, why is the Arthur of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* so uninspiring? If the text is a parody of Arthurian literature why preface the narrative with a description of Madog's troubles with his brother? For all the belief of Richards and Parry in the literary value of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, their interpretations do little more than reinforce the traditional views of parodying satire in general, as trivial, one-dimensional and only mildly amusing.

Although *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is but one text in a heterogeneous collection of tales known as the *Mabinogion*, it is clear that we are in a different world when we read *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*.⁸ The artificial grouping together of the eleven narratives that form the *Mabinogion* gives a distorted view of some of the texts, not least *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. In the context of the *Mabinogion* it is easy to see how the narrative may appear to have certain important elements in common with some of the other tales and with Welsh literary tradition in general, such as the symbolism of the *gwyddbwyll* board, archaic traditions linking ravens with Owain, and the magic mantle and ring. Having analysed these elements, Caitlín Matthews concluded that *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is a tale describing a battle for sovereignty between Owain and Arthur.⁹ The *gwyddbwyll* board appears in *Breuddwyd Maxen*¹⁰ where it does carry a symbolic reference to sovereignty, which becomes clear as the tale progresses, and also functions as part of the backdrop that suggests Elen's inherent nobility. The *gwyddbwyll* board plays a similar role in *Pererindod Siarlymaen*¹¹, where the refined perfection of Hu Gadarn's court is established through the description of its members relaxing:

Yno yd oedynt kyfrwng rif teir mil o vonhedigyon yn gyn hardet o wisgoed mawr-weirhawc, val kyt bei brenhin vei bob un onadunt, neu teyrn deleedawc; rei onadunt yn gware syeckyr, ereill yn gware gwydbwyll, ereill yn arwein gwleic a hebogeu ar eu dwylaw, ereill yn ymdidan a morynyon ieueinc bonhedigeid o verchet teyrned, a diruawr riuedi yno onadunt. Y veint vonhedigeidwyd honno a ryvedawd Chyarlymaen yn vawr.¹²

⁵ Thomas Parry, *Hanes Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg Hyd 1900* (Cardiff, 1945), 67.

⁶ Simon Dentith, *Parody: The New Critical Idiom* (London, 2000), p. ix.

⁷ Griffin, *Satire*, 4.

⁸ Thomas Parry, *Hanes*, 65; many others have also noted that *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is unlike any of the *Mabinogion*, see J. K. Bollard, 'Traddodiad a Dychan yn

Breuddwyd Rhonabwy, *Llên Cymru*, XIII (1985), 155.

⁹ Caitlín Matthews, *Mabon and the Mysteries of Britain* (London, 1987), and *Arthur and the Sovereignty of Britain* (London, 1989), esp. pp. 78–90.

¹⁰ Ifor Williams, *Breuddwyd Maxen* (Bangor, 1927).

¹¹ Stephen J. Williams, *Pererindod Siarlymaen*, BBCS, V (1929–31), 203–26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 209–10.

In the *Life of Saint Cadog*¹³ Arthur is introduced to the narrative in a description of himself, Cai and Bedwyr playing *gwyddbwyll*, showing clearly that this is the pastime of honourable kings and noble men. As the narrative develops, however, the honour and nobility conferred on Arthur by the *gwyddbwyll* board is called into question when he suggests that, instead of rescuing Gwladus and Gwynllyw from the possessive Brychan, he takes Gwladus for himself and is prompted by his companions to remember his duty to save those in need.¹⁴ Therefore, the board appears often as a means by which the status and integrity of a character is shown, as well as a means of suggesting the importance of sovereignty to the character playing. In *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, however, the symbol is present but the symbolism is missing. As with the ring and the mantle, the *gwyddbwyll* board is present within the narrative to draw attention to its own superfluity as an agent of symbolism, not because it is symbolic. That is, the *gwyddbwyll* board does not fulfil the expectations of the reader; it simply does not convey the metaphoric and metonymic statements its presence suggests it will deliver. The *gwyddbwyll* match is played over six rounds in which the reader can only infer who is winning, with Arthur's crushing the pieces perhaps suggesting a tantrum-induced draw. The metaphoric potential of the board to illuminate the off-scene battle is dismissed as the messengers supply a commentary that appears to reflect the supposedly symbolic game. The game has, therefore, been a pointless exercise with no significance, which ironically, is its very function within the text. Similarly, Iddawg draws Rhonabwy's attention to the stone in the ring on Arthur's finger and claims that: 'Vn o rinwedeu y maen yw, dyuot cof yti a weleist yma heno; a phei na welut ti y maen ny doi gof ytti dim o hynn o dro.'¹⁵ The apparent pointlessness of the ring is realized retrospectively as the narrative ends and nothing more is mentioned of the dream, thereby rendering the power of the ring void. That is, the reader is led to expect that this magical quality of the stone will play some future role in the narrative, but it does not. On this evidence alone it is clear that *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is not a symbolic Celtic story depicting a battle for sovereignty as Matthews might suggest, in fact the text appears to be mocking the possibility of just such an interpretation.

The satiric nature of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* relies in part on the disappointment of the reader's expectations regarding those objects that might be supposed to have a symbolic function, but this element of satire only becomes apparent at the end of the narrative. Edgar Slotkin suggests that because of this retrospective element in the satire, this aspect of the text is only appreciable for those who read the text and who therefore have time to think about it and reread it, not for those listening to the narrative being read aloud.¹⁶ Sarah Lynn Higley suggests that in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*:

Great claims . . . are being made for the power of written over spoken language: a hearer hearing this tale might not understand it any more readily than the people in the tale could understand the bards' obscure panegyric, but a reader reading it,

¹³ A. W. Wade-Evans, *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae* (Cardiff, 1944).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27. It should be noted that the author, Lifris, does not attempt to detract from the nobility of Arthur in his portrait of a slightly foolish leader lacking in morals but rather attempts to define Cadog

in light of Arthur's weaknesses as an archetypal king, therefore the establishing of Arthur as a typical and heroic ruler is very important.

¹⁵ *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, 7.

¹⁶ Edgar Slotkin, 'The fabula, story and text of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*', *CMCS*, XVIII (1989), 107.

because he or she can see it and ponder it at leisure, might have more success in assigning it significance.¹⁷

The final paragraph of the text, whether written by the author or not, addresses this issue:

A llyma yr achaws na wyr neb y breidwyt, na bard na chyfarwyd, heb lyuyr, o achaws y geniuer lliw a oed ar y me[i]rch, a hynny o amrauael liw odidawc ac ar yr aruev ac eu kyweirdebeu, ac ar y llenneu gwerthuawr a'r mein rinwedawl.¹⁸

Not only does this final statement suggest that the text needs to be read but also highlights those aspects that require retrospective thought for their satiric intention to be realized. The process of understanding the humour of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is greatly aided by this prompting.

Though the humour remains accessible only through a retrospective glance, much of the comedy in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* induces a very immediate response nevertheless. Parody, irony, punning, and even the simplest of jokes require a certain degree of reflection to be understood, in that they invert and reverse the norm or juxtapose incongruities, and therefore rely on the recipient being familiar with, and being able to recall, the norm. So, for example, the description of Heilyn Goch's house with its filth, fleas and discourtesy is amusing because it offers a refreshing break from the lodgings usually offered to characters in medieval tales. Glewlwyd, for instance, initially refuses Culhwch entry into Arthur's hall, however he does offer him a place in the 'yspytty' where Culhwch is assured: 'Ny byd gwaeth it yno nocet y Arthur yn y llys', and it is clear that admission to Arthur's court is refused on the basis of custom.¹⁹ Even though Geraint is only given humble hospitality by Enid and her family the welcome is assured.²⁰ Because the scene at Heilyn Goch's house evokes other literary examples of hospitality the comparison and the comedy occurs instantly, but requires the reader to be able to recall these other examples.

Another comic moment early in the narrative occurs in the description of the colour of the mantle worn by Iddawg and his horse, which was 'kyn uelynet a blodeu y banadyl'.²¹ The allusion to one of the most famous descriptions of female beauty in a description of a man and his horse creates an obviously comic moment that it is echoed a little further on in the description of the next arrival on the scene, Rhufawn Befr fab Deorthach Wledig, which intensifies the parodying nature of the allusion.²² J. K. Bollard suggests that in general colours are used in the medieval narratives to characterize the characters and make them readily identifiable later in the narratives. In *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, however, many of the characters are described in detail and yet do not reappear and the colours in general do not seem to have a metaphorical or meaningful significance.²³ As the narrative progresses and an increasing number of characters are

¹⁷ Sarah Lynn Higley, 'Perlocutions and perlections in the dream of Rhonabwy', *Exemplaria*, II (1990), 551.

¹⁸ *Breudwyt Ronabwy*, 21.

¹⁹ That is, 'Kyllell a edyw ymwyd, a llynn ymual, ac amsathyr y neuad Arthur. Namyn mab brenhin gylat teithiawc, neu y gerdawr a dycco gerd, ny atter y

mywn'. *Culhwch ac Olwen*, eds R. Bromwich and D. S. Evans (Cardiff, 1997), 4.

²⁰ R. M. Jones, *Y Tair Rhamant* (Aberystwyth, 1960), 104-5.

²¹ *Breudwyt Ronabwy*, 4.

²² *Breudwyt Ronabwy*, 5.

²³ Bollard, 'Traddodiad', 158-9.

introduced, the effect of the colours is to dazzle the audience so that, instead of the descriptions distinguishing between the various knights with their horses, they tend to blur them. In retrospect it is clear that the repetition of the 'blodau y banadl' formula has tended to confuse the issue and not simplify it, but the use of the literary allusion has also had an immediate comic effect in that it is being used in a description of a knight and his horse.

Another very immediate source of humour is found in the events surrounding the splashing of Arthur and his retinue by Addaon and his horse. The clumsy actions of Addaon create a slapstick source of humour and the conversation between Addaon and Elffin, and the commentary offered by Iddawg for Rhonabwy, add to the sense of comedy.

Ssef y gwelynt varchawc yn racvlaenu ac yn brathu march yn y Ryt yny ysgeinwys y dwfyr am penn Arthur a'r escob ac a oed yn y kyghor ygyt ac wynt, yny oedynt kyn wlypet a chyt tynnit o'r auon. Ac ual yd oed yn trossi penn y varch y trewis y gwas oed yn seuyll rac bronn Arthur y march ar y dwyffroen a'r cledyf trwy y wein, yny oed ryued, bei trewit ar dur, na bei yssic yg kwaethach ai kic neu ascwrn. A thynnu a oruc y marchawc y gledyf hyt am hanner y wein a gofyn idaw, 'Paham y trewist ti vy march i, ae yr amarch y mi ae yr kyghor arnaf?' 'Reit oed itt wrth gyghor. Pa ynvydrwyd a wnaei ytti varchogaeth yn gy druttet ac y hysceynei y dwfyr o'r Ryt am penn Arthur a'r esgob kyssegredic ac eu kyghorwyr yny oedynt kyn wlypet a chyt tynnit o'r auon?' 'Minneu a'e kymeraf yn lle kyghor'. Ac ymchoelut penn y uarch drachefyn tu a'e vydin. 'Iddawc', heb y Ronabwy, 'pwy y marchawc gynneu?' 'Y gwas ieuanc kymhennaf a doethaf a wneir yn y teyrnas honn, Adaon uab Telessin'. 'Pwy oed y gwr a drewis y varch ynteu?' 'Gwas traws fenedic, Elphin uab Gwydno'.²⁴

First, Arthur is soaked by the careless actions of Addaon, the son of possibly the most famous Welsh figure, Taliesin. This action not only destroys the distanced sanctity normally afforded Arthur, but also light-heartedly undermines the wisdom normally accorded Taliesin by association. Second, Addaon does not recognize his clumsiness, and the aggressive reaction of Elffin, along with the formality of the conversation, challenges the audiences' expectations regarding the seriousness of the event. Third, Iddawg's suggestion that Addaon is wise and accomplished whereas Elffin is cross and aggressive, seems incongruous given the events narrated. In addition to these comic elements the repetition of the phrase 'kyn wlypet a chyt tynnit o'r auon' heightens the humiliation of Arthur. This incident would bring a smile to the face of anyone hearing or reading it, but in the long term the incident is important because it is one of many examples where Iddawg, as a narrator, proves to be unreliable.

The episodes outlined above are obviously intended to be humorous, but their context is not in itself comic and therefore it is not entirely clear that the narrative as a whole is supposed to be humorous. As already noted, Edgar Slotkin believes the humour of the text is only realized retrospectively. Whilst it is true that the significance of the humour is only fully achieved once the reader is able to reflect on the narrative as a whole, there is an epiphanal moment within the text, an affirmation of this underlying comic narrative that initiates the reflective process, occurring within the *gwyddbwyll* scene.

²⁴ *Breudwyt Ronabwy*, 7-8.

As Arthur and Owain start to play their game they are interrupted by a messenger who appears to have an important message; half a page later we discover that the message is very urgent: Arthur's retinue is attacking Owain's ravens. The description of this first messenger occupies ten lines in which we are told a great deal about his appearance, including details of his socks, buckles and beard. However, six messengers deliver six messages within this one scene, and as each message becomes increasingly urgent, the descriptions of the messengers increase in length and detail. The reader is given some abstract information about the battle between Arthur's 'gweisson bychein' and Owain's 'brein', preceding the arrival of each messenger, and this information always begins with the formula 'sef y klywynt kynnwryf mawr', a phrase that is used consistently from the beginning of the dream. The repetition of this formula has a numbing effect in that the expectation of the reader is heightened each time it is used, but as these commotions amount to very little, the reader becomes immune to the drama such a formula might be expected to effect.²⁵ The expectation of the reader may be that the off-scene battle is important and that the *gwyddbwyll* game will metaphorically describe this battle, but as it turns out there is more information about the battle between Arthur's retinue and the ravens, yet even this information is scarce and does not give more than a general impression of what is happening. The only plentiful information supplied during this scene concerns the appearance of the nameless messengers, who remain anonymous until the scene is ending and their identity becomes superfluous.

Until the third messenger arrives and the ravens retaliate there is every reason to suppose that the messengers are referring to Owain's band of 'ravens' rather than actual birds.²⁶ Anne Ross suggests that the idea of supernatural birds being connected with a hero or god 'is completely in line with the entire Celtic tradition'.²⁷ The revelation that these are actual birds is not that surprising, given the nature of the dream up to this point. Once Iddawg's horse has been accepted, with its powerful inhaling and exhaling, the ravens are only one step further into the grotesque world of Rhonabwy's dream; the ritualistic response of the ravens to the raising of the banner, however, does seem a little strange. While Iddawg provides commentary for those elements that have no symbolic significance within the narrative, such as the ring, he makes no mention of the ravens and the flag, which do appear to require an explanation of some sort. Again the reader is left without the information that might be expected, which in light of the vast and relatively inconsequential detail regarding the appearance of the messengers only serves to undermine these expectations and spark the aforementioned epiphany. The assembly of a host, the playing of a board game, the receiving of important news, the

²⁵ This numbing effect can also be seen in 'Araith Wgon' where the more elevated the description of hospitality Paun Bach expects, the more vulgar the hospitality Gwgon offers. The description of the hag and the vulgar words both gain and lose effect by their context and the reaction to them within the narrative itself as the reader becomes inured to them and Paun Bach oblivious to them. Initially, Gwgon's words are shocking because they are unexpected and are given in reply to a courteous request, the descriptions cease to be shocking after a while because the reader has become used to them and expects them, and is

well aware that the author is merely playing with words. D. Gwenallt Jones (ed.), *Yr Areithiau Pros* (Cardiff, 1934), 8–9.

²⁶ Helen Fulton points out that the mention of ravens could be an inter-textual reference to the praise poetry where ravens are employed as metaphors for particularly ferocious armies. 'Cydestun gwleidyddol Breuddwyd Rhonabwy', *Llên Cymru*, XXII (1999), 54.

²⁷ Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), 254.

raising of a flag and the appearance of ravens is not a configuration unique to *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. Nils Lukman describes seventeen examples of literature, including *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* and *Owain*, where some or all of these elements play an important role in the narratives, and, interestingly, many of these examples have Scandinavian rather than Celtic origins.²⁸ In all of the literature containing these elements discussed by Lukman there is a sense of purpose and progression in the events and a significance given to the raising of the banner and to the raven army. Purpose, progression and significance are conspicuously denied in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. As Proinsias MacCana suggests, the text provides a setting and assembles a cast 'for a story that never materializes'.²⁹ It is not that the text is static, as Saunders Lewis has suggested,³⁰ because, as the digressions demonstrate, something is continually happening. However, this action is mediated through the characters themselves, the reader not experiencing directly through the narrative: the narrative as construct, rather than the narrative itself, is given precedence, again drawing the reader out of the narrative and into a state of reflection. The fact that nothing is ever satisfactorily resolved and the apparent aimlessness of much of the narrative also reinforces the initial impression of the text being static. Characters are introduced, objects with special attributes are mentioned, quests and battles initiated, yet not one of them gives us the satisfaction of understanding, fulfilment or resolve. As MacCana observes: '[There is an] elaborate deception of the reader's expectations, a parody of the dramatic set-pieces of traditional narrative, in short, a witty and elegant spoof'.³¹

The descriptions of the messengers are incredibly accurate and Dafydd Glyn Jones has shown that the adjectives are not superfluous within the descriptions themselves.³² This contrasts with the view held by W. J. Gruffydd who described the effect of the descriptions as 'tyrru ansoddeiriau disgrifiadol cyfansawdd naill ar ben y llall heb fesur a rheswm'.³³ Melville Richards demonstrated that there is a greater use of adjectives in *Geraint* and *Peredur* than in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, although this defence of adjectives fails to acknowledge the ironic overtones of the descriptions.³⁴ While not denying that there is indeed a degree of 'berfformio geiriol', Dafydd Glyn Jones maintains that the descriptions do not constitute rhetoric at the expense of sense and suggests that these passages are transparent – any opacity the reader may feel is present in the text derives from the disjointed narrative flow.³⁵ However, Edgar Slotkin has suggested that the negation of expectations regarding the function of description, such as its usual ability to 'orient the reader or listener to the nature of the discourse', in actual fact 'disorient us', so that it 'contributes to the opacity of the dream-vision in general'. Therefore, '[t]he effect is to put description, and the author's ability to create description, into the foreground, since narrative becomes so hidden behind it'.³⁶ I would suggest that the descriptions do indeed add to the opacity of the dream, but only for as long as the nature of the dream

²⁸ Nils Lukman, 'The raven banner and the changing ravens', *Classica et Mediaevalia*, XIX (1958).

²⁹ Proinsias MacCana, *The Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1992), 91.

³⁰ Saunders Lewis, *Braslun o Hanes Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg* (Cardiff, 1932), 43.

³¹ Proinsias MacCana, *Mabinogi*, 90.

³² Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd Rhonabwy', *Y*

Traddodiad Rhyddiaith yn yr Oesau Canol, ed. Geraint Bowen (Llandysul, 1974), 190–3.

³³ W. J. Gruffydd, *Llên Cymru o 1400–1600* (Liverpool, 1922), 64.

³⁴ *Breudwyt Rhonabwy*, p. xix.

³⁵ Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd', 191–3.

³⁶ Slotkin, 'Fabula', 101–2.

is unclear, and that the moment of clarity occurs at some stage during the *gwyddbwyll* scene when the battle between Arthur's retinue and Owain's ravens intensifies. The messengers' clothes and weapons seem least relevant at this point yet their descriptions become increasingly detailed and vivid, thereby deliberately frustrating the dramatic tension expected of such a scene. When the descriptions of the messengers become but a blur of adjectives in the reader's haste to reach the anticipated battle scene, a scene which will never be made manifest, and which the reader gradually realizes will not be made manifest, then it is possible to relax and enjoy the story and the descriptions with the wry smile indicative of one who has been caught out, but who now sees the author's game and is willing to play. While the author is not a rhetorician who draws attention to style at the expense of everything else, the descriptions are also wonderful examples of rhetoric at its best; the author's skill is abundantly clear in these passages, which initially lose and then gain significance within the context of the story as a whole. The very transparency that created the opacity is resolved with the hazy understanding that the reader gains once the second messenger arrives with the news that Owain's ravens are attacking Arthur's men, whose broken bodies are now being dropped from the sky while Arthur and Owain remain at their polite game of *gwyddbwyll*. The nightmarish quality of the descriptions of the ravens taking flight and brutally attacking Arthur's retinue is dissipated by the narrative as the comic incongruity of the polite *gwyddbwyll* game is established, so that the grotesque becomes carnivalesque and 'all that was frightening in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities'.³⁷ The methodical and symmetrical repetition of the pattern of messengers³⁸ signals a lack of progression and the final crushing of the *gwyddbwyll* pieces indicates once and for all that the digressions will never be satisfied with any real sense of closure. The rest of the dream presents fewer surprises once the reader understands that the conventions of narrative will not be realized. The increasingly ludicrous battle between Arthur's bullying retinue and Owain's vengeful and macabre ravens becomes comic as the violence increases, especially when contrasted with the nonchalance of the two great heroes of Welsh literature and the mimesis inherent in the relative importance given to the messengers, the tale-tellers over the tale. The potential solemnity of the 'gware dy whare' is undermined by the farcical context in which the heroes appear; any drama this cool response might be expected to convey is killed off by the frustration of dramatic tension. These contending patriarchs for the sovereignty of Britain, as Matthews would have them, show no common sense, no nobility and no sense of consequence; they are simply not the majestic, or heroic figures of other medieval narratives.

Despite the lack of control Arthur demonstrates and despite his precarious leadership, he is treated with the same protocol and reverence that he receives in other stories. This poor excuse for a king is sent tokens from Greece, the poets sing his praise; but the emptiness of these gestures is apparent in that only one of those present understands the poem – the praise is thereby rendered void and as superfluous as much that has gone before, as the general purpose of praise poems was to spread the fame of the hero. The reader expecting the archetypal Arthur and his retinue is faced with an inef-

³⁷ Michail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN, 1984), 47.

³⁸ Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd', 183.

fective fool with little authority, although his power is shown as consistently as ever. Edgar Slotkin has perceptively noted that the post-Geoffrian biography of Arthur is problematic in that it is 'a fabula of failure, of collapse, of internal betrayal and breakdown'.³⁹ Iddawg's confession of the part he played in Arthur's downfall highlights the fact that this fabula presents an unhappy ending, even if *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* does not.

Rhonabwy's dream has a happy ending but at the conscious expense of avoiding anything that would justify an heroic atmosphere: heroic atmospheres are justified, after all, by people killing each other – no doubt for the best reasons – not by representing festive occasions in Cornwall.⁴⁰

The process of praising Arthur, therefore, can be seen to be a mechanical response as there is nothing heroic about the Arthur of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. In fact, much of what happens in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* seems mechanical and ritualistic with little, if any, significance; the battle with the ravens has been as much of a game as the *gwyddbwyll*. Following that game the characters play praise the king, then the feasting in Cornwall game; they may then go on a quest, assemble a host, play some more *gwyddbwyll*, receive messages and raise a flag somewhere else. The emphasis is placed directly on the narrative, and therefore language itself, as a construct: the author has successfully drawn the reader out of the tale and into a state of reflection on the construction of that tale.

Arthur is rarely portrayed as impeccably perfect, and frequently presented as 'an intrinsically comic character'⁴¹ in medieval Welsh narratives; nevertheless, he is accorded a high degree of respect, especially in post-Geoffrian literature. It would appear that Arthur's name represents an idea of heroic nobility even if the majority of Welsh Arthurian narratives contain a light-hearted portrait of him; the reference to Arthur in the *Gododdin* evokes heroism, he appears in the Saints' Lives as an archetypal ruler, and represents a golden age in the narratives set 'in the time of Arthur'.⁴² The importance accorded to Arthur as the embodiment of the heroic and a symbol of cultural identity can be clearly seen in a conversation between Iddawg and Rhonabwy after one of the many commotions: "Iddawg", heb y Ronabwy, "ae ffo a wna y llu ragof." "Ny ffoes yr ymherawdyr Arthur eryoet, a phe i clywit arnat yr ymadrawd hwnn gwr diuetha vydut."⁴³

To doubt the heroism of Arthur is to lose faith in heroism itself, and all that Arthur represents in his revered position in the later medieval tales. Though Arthur does very little in the 'romances', he is crucial to the settings of these narratives, not only in terms of time and space, but as an ideological discourse whose function includes being an emblem of security required to satisfy an almost spiritual need rather than to merely commit acts of valour. The implication of the importance of Arthur, not simply as a literary character but almost as an ideological belief system is wonderfully conceived and deconstructed within this short dialogue. Arthur does not flee from his enemy in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* (although he is happy to walk away from the battle-field without

³⁹ Slotkin, 'Fabula', 105

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Oliver J. Padel, *Arthur in Medieval Welsh Literature* (Cardiff, 2000), 123.

⁴² Such as *Ystoria Taliesin*, ed. Patrick Ford (Cardiff,

1992), and 'Breuddwyd Llywelyn Goch ap Meurig Hen', referred to as 'Yr Adwath' in the *Areithiau Pros* by D. Gwenallt Jones (Cardiff, 1934), 65.

⁴³ *Breudwyt Ronabwy*, 10.

having drawn his sword), however, the reader and Rhonabwy are dependent upon Iddawg's assurance that Arthur will never flee. Iddawg's statement, therefore, represents another narrator's version of events. The effect created is destabilizing. The narrator of the text is expected to be an objective voice and throughout the narrative has been describing and showing rather than telling. The introduction of Iddawg as another narrator who undermines the role accorded him with nonsensical explanations creates doubt about Iddawg's reliability as a narrator; this doubt, however, originated in Iddawg's self-confessed involvement in the battle of Camlan which is offered as an explanation for his nickname, 'Cordd Prydain', at the beginning of the dream. This clear presentation of an unreliable narrator in a parody of traditional prose indicates the literary and political concern of the author; by exposing the fallibility of Iddawg the author draws attention to the fallibility of all narrators as agents of truth, including himself.

Within *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* Arthur does not demonstrate the honourable heroism that Iddawg never doubts, yet Iddawg warns Rhonabwy that admitting that Arthur is capable of less than model heroism is dangerous. The danger perhaps lies in the exposing of what is represented as fact or truth. I am not suggesting that Arthurian literature was expected to be believed as historical fact, but rather that even a fictional 'fact' is subject to interpretation, and the interpretation Iddawg warns Rhonabwy (and the reader) to accept is the one in which Arthur is a great military leader who does not shirk from battles and is deserving of praise, despite his presentation suggesting a contrary 'truth'. This sentiment of blind acceptance is emphasized in the passage detailing the poetry sung by the bards: 'Ac ar hynny nachaf ueird yn dyuot y datkanv kerd y Arthur. Ac nyt oed dyn a adnapei y gerd honno, namyn Kadyrieith ehun, eithyr y uot yn uolyant y Arthur.'⁴⁴ There is evidently some sort of joke aimed at court poetry and its deliberate complex obscurity,⁴⁵ but this passage also illustrates that it hardly matters whether the poem is understandable, as those listening to it are satisfied in knowing that the poem is praising Arthur. It *conforms*. Therefore, the passage seems to mock poets, patrons and audiences as the power of literature to communicate is shown to be ineffective. This passage also serves as a metonym for *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* in that the text appears on the surface to comply with the conventions of an Arthurian narrative; no one seems to know what it is about (except the author himself), other than that it is about Arthur. Looking at both the reference to the poem and Iddawg's comment that it is in some way dangerous to think that Arthur is capable of fleeing a battle, I would suggest that neither are specific enough to be criticisms of Arthur, or Arthurian literature, on the one hand, or court poetry and poets, on the other. Given the nature of the text in its entirety it may be more reasonable to suppose that the critical references are aimed at highlighting the way in which presentation and representation of characters, and situations (both historical and fictional) are controlled by authors and accepted uncritically by audiences. The late-twelfth-century Latin writer, Walter Map,⁴⁶ makes several comments that would appear to relate to this issue of literature as a form of representation that is interpreted

and mediated through authors and narrators. *De Nugis Curialium* primarily addresses the issue of hypocrisy at the royal court and within religious orders, yet the structure and style of *De Nugis*, along with direct references to literature, highlight and interrogate the way information is presented in literature of all kinds. One example of the way Walter Map challenges the reader's acceptance of literature is by drawing attention to the narrator as a subjective interpreter not an objective bearer of truth; he achieves this by claiming throughout that he is merely presenting information from which the reader is to infer any meaning or moral: 'I am but your huntsman. I bring you the game, it is for you to make dainty dishes out of it'.⁴⁷ However, Map contradicts such statements by investing the anecdotes with moral messages, and commenting on the actions of the characters. *De Nugis* is filled with parodying literary allusions and ironic statements that make the work very funny, but the biting satire comes from his critical attitude to history, culture, society and institutions of all sorts, and the hypocrisy of their presentation and representation, that is, the role of literature and language. Map warns the reader: 'Withdraw not your eye from [the page] unless you have thoroughly viewed it and taken it in; for you should read and scrutinize every page you see and not one should be disused without being pursued.'⁴⁸

Professor Gwyn Thomas has pointed to the fact that in the Middle Ages writing about history was not an objective pursuit but was influenced by contemporary conditions and that consequently, historical accounts could be written to fulfil a specific purpose.⁴⁹ Literary genres often blurred in the Middle Ages so that there was no sharp division between fiction and history. The case of Arthur is a perfect example of a figure prominent in both pseudo-historical and fictional narratives used to glorify the past by both the Welsh and Anglo-Normans. Because history perhaps does not provide perfect characters, Arthur and other historical (in the loosest possible sense of the word) figures are not presented as perfect; however, they are revered and venerated as in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*.

The Life of St Cadog is an excellent example of a text that creates a tyrannical and ruthless character but then exalts him. At every turn Cadog is shown to be a cruel and malicious man who achieves authority through the misuse of his power as a man of God, yet this narrative was used in the Middle Ages to raise the status of the saint. The humour of the text lies in the fact that Cadog is at liberty, or rather, has a right, to treat those around him with such contempt. Lifris has no need to justify the saintliness of Cadog as his authority comes from God and the medieval audience would have accepted the saintliness and the exalted position unquestioningly. Because God had supposedly sanctioned the hierarchy of authority, and because order was so important, there was never any real danger of a medieval audience disapproving or adopting the high moral ground over the pseudo-historical subjects of narratives. As Walter Map complains:

If . . . you see Hannibal or Menestrates, or any name sweet with the perfume of hoar antiquity, your spirits rise and you yearn and exult at the thought of entering on the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 2, 32, 209.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5, 1, 407.

⁴⁹ 'Doedd haneswyr yr Oesoedd Canol, at ei gilydd, ddim hanner mor bartiolar . . . Yn yr Oesoedd Canol yr oedd i'r presennol le llawer pwysicach yn y weith-

red o lunio'r gorffennol nag sydd ganddo heddiw. Gellid ysgrifennu hanes i bwrpas neilltuol'. 'Bras ddosbarthiad ar ein rhyddiaith gynnar', *Ysgrifau Beirniadol*, XI (1979), 33.

⁴⁴ *Breudwyt Ronabwy*, 20.

⁴⁵ In addition to the jibe at the obscurity of court poetry is the reference to Cadriaith's involvement in securing pay for the poets.

⁴⁶ *Walter Map: De Nugis Curialium – Courtiers Trifles*, ed. M. R. James, revised by C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1994; reprint).

golden ages of old fable. The tyranny of Nero, the avarice of Juba and aught else ancients offers you – these you embrace with entire reverence.⁵⁰

Breuddwyd Rhonabwy can be seen to expose the mechanics underlying the narrative tradition, in terms of the expectations a reader may have regarding the role of narrators and authors, as well as illustrating the incongruity inherent in the mechanical exaltation of characters who are undeserving of such privileges. This critique is not an attack on the figure of Arthur, or Arthurian literature, rather it shows how the presentation of literature is highly controlled, and interpretation of literature a subjective process.

Edgar Slotkin has drawn attention to the way in which *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* alters traditional narrative patterning by, for example, reversing the chronology of the Arthurian fabula so that the battle of Camlan (where Arthur is killed) is mentioned by Iddawg at the beginning of the dream, and the battle of Badon is yet to be fought. But the battle of Badon is not fought and in fact it is pushed further away by being postponed; the story, therefore, would appear to be moving backwards. The fact that '[t]he dream is not a dream of the future but of the past',⁵¹ and that there is no allegorical or prophetic purpose to *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, contradicts the generic expectations of the text as a dream-vision, and consequently highlights 'how much like a real dream it is'.⁵²

Narrative expectations are continually foiled in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, but so too are the expectations a reader has about the ability of language to communicate. Sarah Lynn Higley has highlighted the way in which communicating is an essentially problematic process in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, both in the frame and in the dream. For example, the communications between Madog and Iorwerth at the beginning of the text are unsuccessful in that they do not fulfil their intentions; Iddawg explains how he was able to manipulate the communications between Arthur and Medrawd, thereby kindling strife. Angela Carson has shown how there is a pattern of triads throughout *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, in which there are two opponents and a 'go-between'.⁵³ As Higley suggests, these mediators are unsuccessful in their use of language to effect peace.⁵⁴ It is not only the mediators who seem to have difficulty in communicating and Higley suggests that language is used almost as a weapon in the speech of many of the characters: 'It would seem then that those who can control their words, replace them with enigmatic gestures, make others ask for information or favor, or, better yet frustrate their illocutionary intentions by denying them answers or results are in a position of superiority'.⁵⁵

Breuddwyd Rhonabwy is a 'literary statement about the unreliability of oral statements and the opacity of literary statements',⁵⁶ it is a 'carefully critical look, made with serious but good-natured humour, at the way in which the past, through narrative, haunts the present, any present'.⁵⁷ It emphasizes that language is a tool of power, and therefore a tool of the powerful and so is a weapon, and is shown to be as much a construct as this author's narrative and any metafiction itself. *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is the work of an author who knows his mythology, who knows the strength of a tale, its appeal, and its influ-

ence on the minds of his fellow man, but for all that is not taken in by any of it.⁵⁸ As Dafydd Glyn Jones has suggested, the satire in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, has several objects and operates on several levels,⁵⁹ and many of these levels would seem to reflect literary concerns. It is perhaps because the humour is so diffuse that a precise meaning of the text has eluded its readers for so long. The author has destroyed the trust of the reader in almost every literary and linguistic aspect expected of a narrative: why should we then believe that there would be a meaning in this text? The temptation to attach a political significance to the text is great, and Helen Fulton has perhaps offered the most insightful interpretation to date of a historical and political context in which to place *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. It seems clear that an author who goes to such great lengths to produce a literary work that remains faithful to the native narrative tradition yet breaks all the rules and exposes the uses made of literature and language would have some ideological or political reason for doing so. *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is funny, and the comic element relies heavily on the juxtaposition of incongruities and failed expectations, that is, on the literary and linguistic manipulation. Fulton argues that the satire in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is aimed at the type of power established on external appearances rather than any inherent authority belonging to an individual.⁶⁰ This type of discrepancy, whether between the appearance of authority and actual authority or between what appears to be a praise poem and an actual elegy, is echoed throughout *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, as I have suggested. The fame of heroes and their honour is maintained by language through literature (oral and written),⁶¹ and the author of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* destabilizes the readers' trust in the objectivity of this relationship. The analysis of the humour offered in this paper complements the kind of interpretation of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* argued by Fulton, because literature has always been the voice of power. However, I have reservations about the application of a 'meaning' to *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, not because I find fault with any particular argument that has been offered, but because the author has done everything feasible to give the appearance of conforming to the conventions of literature and language and yet has succeeded in destroying countless expectations. The author certainly has the last laugh, and I suspect that the joke is on us, who, in the twenty-first century, continue to try and find a meaning in a text that was perhaps intended to have no meaning. Maybe, after all that has been claimed of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, it is, in the final analysis, simply meaningless rhetoric of the funniest and most ingenious kind.

⁵⁰ Walter Map, 5, 1, p. 407.

⁵¹ Slotkin, 'Fabula', 95.

⁵² Ibid., 94.

⁵³ Angela Carson, 'The structure and meaning of the dream of Rhonabwy', *Philological Quarterly*, LIII

(1974), 289–303.

⁵⁴ Higley, 'Perlocutions', 543.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 545.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 550.

⁵⁷ Slotkin, 'Fabula', 111.

⁵⁸ 'Y mae'n waith awdur sy'n gwybod ei chwedloniaeth, sy'n gwybod beth yw nerth chwedl, a'i hapêl, a'i dylanwad ar feddylliau ei gyd-ddynion; ond nad yw, o'i ran ei hun, yn credu un dim ynddi'. Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd', 195.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 177.

⁶⁰ Fulton, 'Cyd-destun', 48.

⁶¹ Culhwch threatens to shame Arthur by spreading his dis-praise to the four corners of the world, thereby demonstrating the relationship between language and authority. *Culhwch ac Olwen*, 6.