

An Introduction to Celtic Literatures (HPCS4008)

(Week 1, part 1)

1 Lyric and Nature Poetry



2 Heroic Poetry



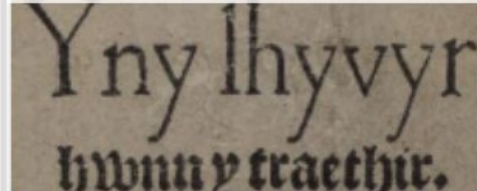
3 The Four Branches and the Táin



4 Dafydd ap Gwilym and cynghanedd



5 The Renaissance



‘Celtic’ literature?

- **i.e. literature composed in a Celtic language**
- Attention to the natural world.
- Sense of place, landscape.
- Supernatural elements and the ‘Otherworld’.
- Imagination, vivid description.
- Rhetoric, elaborate language, importance of sound and musicality in poetry.
- Prominent social function of poet and storyteller: literature was more than just entertainment, it contributed to the well-being of society as a whole.

Chronological Framework

Event	Period	Dates
Roman settlement of Britannia	Roman	43 – 410 AD
Anglo-Saxon invasions	Post-Roman	5 th – 7 th centuries
British colonize Brittany		
Christianization of Ireland	Age of Saints	
	Early Medieval	6 th – 10 th centuries
Norman Conquest		England 1066 Wales (partially) by 1094 Ireland 1169 onwards
	High Medieval (Twelfth-century Renaissance)	11 th – 13 th centuries
Edwardian Conquest of Wales		Completed by 1283
	Late Medieval	14 th and 15 th centuries
Battle of Bosworth		1485
Tudor dynasty		
	Renaissance	16 th century
Protestant Reformation		1517 onwards
Acts of Union between England and Wales		1536-43

Sagas / Tales / Stories

- Prose compositions, originally recited from memory by professional storytellers.
- Often in interconnected cycles featuring central characters, such as the Irish Ulster Cycle and Finn Cycle, and the Arthurian material.
- Much of the content is mythical, relating to divinities and supernatural events.
- Plots use common folktale motifs
- ‘Onomastic stories’ explaining place-names and landscape features.
- The Arthurian romances which became popular in Europe from the 12th century draw on this earlier material.

Welsh examples: *Pedair Cainc y Mabinogi* / Four Branches of the Mabinogi
Culhwch ac Olwen (earliest Arthurian tale)

Irish examples: *Táin Bó Cúailnge* / The Cattle-drive of Cuailnge
Compert Con Culainn / The Conception of Cú Chulainn
Togail Bruidne Da Derga / The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel
Longes Mac N-Uislenn / The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu

‘Heroic’ poetry and praise poetry

- Eulogies and elegies celebrating the virtues of kings and princes, and the heroic deeds of warriors, ensuring everlasting fame for those who died in battle (the heroic ideal).
- Composed according to strict metrical rules by professional court poets and recited to musical accompaniment on ceremonial occasions.
- This is the earliest surviving literature in Welsh, dated (by some) from around 600, and the tradition continues strongly until the end of the Middle Ages, as it also does in Irish Bardic poetry.
 - ‘Heroic poems’ attributed to Taliesin, in praise of Urien Rheged, and to Aneirin, in praise of the warriors of Gododdin.
 - The later praise-poems of the Welsh ‘Poets of the Princes’ (12th and 13th century) and the ‘Poets of the Gentry’ (14th to 16th centuries).
 - Praise-poetry also encompasses sub-genres of praise addressed to female patrons and churchmen.
 - Elegies to deceased patrons are closely allied to praise poetry.
 - Some poems addressed to saints and to the Almighty also share features with secular praise poetry.

Lyric Poetry

- The defining feature is the focus on personal feelings and experience, usually expressed in the first person or dramatic persona.
- This may be in response to the natural world, such as seasonal poems celebrating the coming of summer.
- Also love poetry, religious devotion and meditation, and expressions of personal loss (as opposed to more formal elegies).
- Examples:
 - Summer / May-time poems (see next half of the lecture)
 - ‘Gorhoffedd’ poems
 - ‘The Old Man’s Lament’ (Llywarch Hen) and ‘The Old Woman of Beare’
 - ‘Suibne the Wild Man in the Forest’
 - ‘Stafell Gynddylan’ (Heledd’s lament for her brother)
 - Love poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym, www.dafyddapgwilym.net
 - Gerard Murphy (ed.), *Early Irish Lyrics*
 - Nicolas Jacobs (ed.), *Early Welsh Gnostic and Nature Poetry*

Other (often overlapping!) categories

- The Cynddylan Cycle may contain lyric poetry but can also be described as saga poetry, since it is thought to form part of a wider narrative tradition.
- Irish sagas were often expressed as a combination of prose and poetry, known as *prosimetrum*.
- Religious poems are often considered a genre in themselves.
- There are other genres, too, that are beyond the scope of this introductory module, including prophetic poetry, satire, and poems of request and thanks.

‘Authorship’

- Sometimes poems are anonymous.
- Even where they have an attribution in the manuscript (e.g., *Aneirin a’e cant*), this cannot always be taken at face value.
- Attributions are relatively ‘safe’ where they are to known, historical poets praising well-known and well-attested patrons, e.g., the 12th and 13th century Poets of the Princes.
- BUT there can be deliberate forgeries, e.g. Dafydd ap Gwilym poems (14th century) forged by Iolo Morganwg (1747–1826).
- Occasionally a poet’s own ‘autograph’ copy of a poem survives, e.g., Lewis Glyn Cothi (15th century) and Dafydd ap Gwilym.

‘The Memorandum of the Five Poets’

In the 9th-century Welsh Latin *Historia Brittonum*.

Ida, filius Eobba, tenuit regiones in sinistrali parte Brittanniae, id est Umbri maris, et regnavit annis duodecim, et iunxit Din-Guairoi guurth Berneich. Tunc [O]utigirn in illo tempore fortiter dimicabat contra gentem Anglorum. Tunc Talhaern Tat Aguen in poemate claruit, et Neirin, et Taliessin, et Bluchbard, et Cian qui vocatur Gue[ni]th Guaut, simul uno tempore in poemate Brittanico claruerunt. Mailcunus magnus rex apud Brittones regnabat, id est, in regione Guenedotae. . .

‘Ida son of Eobba held kingdoms in the northern part of Britain, that is the Humber Sea, and he ruled twelve years [r. 547–59], and he joined Bamburgh to Brynaich. Then Eudeyrn at that time was bravely fighting against the English [or Anglian] people. Then **Talhaearn Tad Awen**, Father of poetic inspiration, was renowned in poetry, and **Aneirin**, and **Taliesin**, and **Blwchfardd**, and **Cian** who was called ‘Wheat of Prophetic Verse’, were at the same time famous in Brythonic poetry. Maelgwn the great king was ruling among the Britons, that is, in the kingdom of Gwynedd.’

J. T. Koch, in *Celtic Culture: a Historical Encyclopedia*
(Santa Barbara, California, 2006)

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- **In some cases the concept of an ‘author’ isn’t really appropriate at all.** Prose texts are often regarded as having developed over time with contributions from many storytellers. This happened with poetry too, e.g., prophetic poems attributed to Merlin or Taliesin, evolving over time in response to changing historical circumstances.

‘Masks’ or ‘personas’

- The poet speaking in another person’s voice or presenting himself as a different character
 - A different aspect of himself, e.g., Dafydd ap Gwilym as lover, nobleman, or butt of humour
 - A completely different person, e.g. (perhaps), Heledd, ‘the old woman of Beare’ (also Llywarch Hen and Suibne – see next lecture).

Who was the poet?

- Another thing to think about is what the poet's status may have been.
- Was he a professional poet?
 - A permanent part of a patron's retinue?
 - Or travelling 'on circuit' to seek patronage from a variety of different patrons?
- Some princes or noblemen were poets themselves.
- Churchmen and monks might also be poets.
- At least one woman poet, by the 15th century, namely Gwerful Mechain.
- A professional poet would need to please his patron... but some were brave enough to criticise their patrons too!

The purpose of literary texts

- Creative impulse, expressing the poet's feelings or in response to the world around him? (Either personal or universal.)
- Prayer, mediation or devotional (personal or to inspire others).
- Educational or edifying
 - passing on old traditions.
 - providing models for how people were expected to behave.
- Reinforcing the social contract between a ruler and his people.
- Commemoration of individuals or events.
- Expressing discontent and inviting change, e.g., prophetic poems.
- Personal grievances (e.g., some satires), or seeking reconciliation (*dadolwch* poems).
- **Entertainment!**

Lyric poetry

- Focus on feelings in response to religion, nature and love
- Many genres – individual poems, and poems related to prose sagas or well-known stories (Suibne, Heledd, Llywarch Hen...)
- Vivid description of the natural world, often as mirror for human feelings or circumstances