

Hello everyone. This is an added session following on from Monday's, as I wanted to say a bit more about how the heroic ideal persisted, and how it was modified, in later court poetry, of the twelfth and thirteen centuries - what's sometimes called the Age of the Princes. I'll also define some of the terms - so what's the difference between heroic and praise poetry, and indeed court poetry. And I'll talk about some other things to look out for in the poetry, including nature, and the poet's persona. Amongst other things.

(SLIDE) So to start with some terminology - what is the difference between heroic and praise poetry?

- Heroic poetry, as I see it, is all about the heroic ideal. It might be the work of a poet praising warriors known to him in his own time, or one looking back at, or recreating, or imagining, a much older conflict.
- And then praise poetry is praise of a particular individual or group of individuals.
 - Heroism and generosity are usually mentioned but other attributes are also praised (especially in the later Middle Ages).
 - The term tends to be restricted to poems where we think the people praised were real and known to the poet.
- So the Gododdin, if composed in the sixth century, could be both a praise poem and a heroic poem.
- Or if we took the view that it was composed in the ninth or tenth century we'd probably just call it a heroic poem.
- **Praise poems were very common and had an important social and political role up until the end of the Middle Ages and beyond.**

(SLIDE) Arguably the earliest Welsh praise poetry is in the poems attributed to Taliesin, that Dafydd discusses in his book. Here, as in the Gododdin, we find the contrasting virtues of liberality at court and ferocity on the battlefield. But importantly, Taliesin's attention is focussed on his king: often Urien Rheged, another ruler of the Old North. And as far as military matters are concerned the focus is on the King's role as defender, and on his victories, and his leadership. There's no suggestion here of fighting to the death just to gain fame.

So where in the Gododdin we have lines like 'The son of Nwython slew... A hundred princes / So that he might be praised' or 'May you attain the abode of Heaven because you did not flee', in the Taliesin poems Urien, ruler of the kingdom of Rheged in the Old North, is Rheged's defender, a famed lord, and his land's anchor - an effective metaphor for stability and protection.

In another poem Taliesin, or an anonymous poet in the persona of Taliesin, even contemplates in horror what a disaster it would be if Urien were killed. It seems he has gone to battle with his spear, and the poet imagines him being carried back on a stretcher with

blood on his face, and imagines the grief of his widow. And then with a nice dramatic touch we have the poet hearing a distant sound, and sending a boy to look, and it's not an earthquake or a flood, it's Urien and his army returning with victory.

I should emphasize that as with the Gododdin we don't know whether this is genuine praise poetry in the sense of being composed by a poet who really knew Urien. But it *is* regarded as a precursor of the later praise poetry, as regards the way the king is praised as defender and sustainer, and the close, interdependent relationship between him and his poet.

So on to the later poetry (SLIDE) - which needs a bit more defining of terms. So 'court poets' is the term we use for professional poets associated with the royal or princely courts of Wales, from the early Middle Ages to the late thirteenth century, which is when Wales lost its political independence. And the court poets of those last two centuries – that is, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, are the ones we know most about, because so much of their work has survived. They're often called the Poets of the Princes, and there are about thirty of them – named individuals, who praised named patrons.

Chapter four in Dafydd's book gives a good introduction, and if you're interested in the Poets of the Princes I'd also recommend D. Myrddin Lloyd's chapter in the first volume of the *Guide to Welsh Literature*, which I've scanned. You can get it (SLIDE) via the Leganto reading list which hopefully you can find on Moodle - where the arrow is, top right. And if you click on that you should get all the reading material with links to ebooks and scans. So here's the entry (SLIDE) for the Guide to Welsh literature. Where it says 'view online', at the end, you don't get the whole thing I'm afraid, just that one chapter that I've been allowed to scan. But anyway this system should hopefully make it easier to find things and access them.

So for the rest of this session I'll just be directing you to some specific things to look out for as you read those chapters, or as you read the poems more widely. And if you *would* like to read more of these Welsh poems – and I must emphasize that *if*, I don't want to overload you with reading, but just direct you to things you might find interesting -(SLIDE) so yes, if you'd like to read more of these poems there's some in Tony Conran's anthology, which you can get fairly cheaply on Amazon. Or in the case of poems involving Welsh saints, they're available online at the website of the saints project that I worked on a few years ago. (SLIDE) There's some twelfth century poems, to St David or Dewi, and Cadfan, and Tysilio, and some later ones, and some prose saints Lives written in Welsh and Latin. There's more material going to be added later. But that's a bit of a digression, so back to the Poets of the Princes...

(SLIDE) I want to emphasize that we do know a lot about these poets. We know their names, we often know where they were from. And we know a lot about their status, because it's set out in the Welsh Laws. So in the section of the Law of Hywel Dda which lists all the duties and privileges of the officers of the royal court, we have details of two offices which would have been much sought-after amongst all the poets of Wales.

First, every royal court had a household poet or *bardd teulu* who was an officer of the king and travelled with his war-band, lodging with the court physician and, apparently, very much a part of military activities. And every region had a *pencerdd* or chief of song, who was

effectively the leader of the poets' craft in a particular region. He also had an honoured place in the royal court, but wasn't one of the king's servants in the same way as the household poet. There were also lower-status poets and musicians, or those on their way up, as it were. But it's the works of the higher-status poets that tend to get preserved.

So as I said, it's best if you read Dafydd Johnston's and D. Myrddin Lloyd's chapters to get a full introduction to these poets. But here's a few things to look out for as you read those chapters, or the poetry more widely.

(SLIDE) Firstly, keep an eye out for those elements of the heroic ideal - especially that juxtaposition between ferocity on the battlefield and generosity in the feasting hall. Look out for some of that military imagery we saw in the Gododdin, like bloodstained weapons, battered shields, the metaphor of the warrior as reaper, and so on. And look out for the idea of the king or prince as defender, and to references to fame - though without so much of an idea of seeking fame at all costs. Like Taliesin, the Poets of the Princes didn't want their patrons to die gloriously, they wanted them to live and win victories and keep their lands safe and prosperous.

That brings me on to elegies, poems commemorating the dead, which are closely allied to praise poetry - or could indeed be considered a category of praise poetry.

- They focus of course on praise of the departed – often very general, praising the usual attributes, but may allude to death in battle
- There is often a strong expression of personal grief. How much this was real, and how much was just the poet's professional persona, is sometimes hard to judge. But I am sure it was often *very* real - for example in the elegy for Hywel ab Owain which you can find in Jackson's *Celtic Miscellany*, composed by his foster-brother Peryf ap Cedifor.
- Another common feature of elegies is an expression of concern for the fate of the land in the absence of the deceased.
- Sometimes that concern is tempered by confident hope that a son and heir will be a worthy successor - though not always, depending on the circumstances. In the case of Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch's elegy for Llywelyn ap Gruffudd the despair is unrelenting.
- And lastly there is usually a strong Christian message, desiring Heaven for the departed

Religious elements are quite strong in the praise poetry more widely - a poet might express a similar hope of an eventual heavenly reward for his patron while he was still alive and flourishing. There were also (SLIDE) entire poems praising God, and poems where the poet asks forgiveness for his sins as he contemplates death - perhaps near the end of his life, or at times this could just be a literary device

And as I mentioned earlier there are poems praising saints and their shrines – the three composed by the Poets of the Princes are to Dewi, Cadfan and Tysilio.

I particularly like the two ‘Gorhoffedd’ poems by Gwalchmai ap Meilyr and Hywel ab Owain, which contain elements of praise poetry. The most striking theme is boasting praise of the poets themselves, as warriors and lovers. But they also praise the natural world - one of those Celtic elements we saw in the earlier poetry.

And another feature of these poems that I think we could count as a Celtic one is the very strong persona of the poet himself. Gwalchmai and Hywel are the heroes of their own poems. It’s significant I think that Hywel was a prince (a son of Owain Gwynedd), so he wasn’t a professional poet praising others as his main calling. He composed love poems too, which we can talk about some more in a couple of weeks when we get on to Dafydd ap Gwilym.

As for Gwalchmai, he probably *was* a professional poet, sometimes at least, but seems also to have been a soldier fighting for Owain Gwynedd. He seems to have been an interesting, independent-minded character, who experimented with different genres.

So anyway that’s probably enough from me. If you’re interested in these poets, do read the D. Myrddin Lloyd chapter, and perhaps some more of the poems themselves. (SLIDE) Here’s a summary of things to look out for. So we have those heroic and military elements I talked about – praise of courage, and the patron’s role as a defender and in bringing victory

There’s those references to generosity, often involving mead or wine, but various kinds of gifts are mentioned too.

There’s religious elements; and nature elements, as in the Gorhoffedd poems.

And do look out for how the poets portray themselves. They come across as strong characters, the heroes of their own poems. Some of this may be no more than a persona or mask they put on as part of their role or to entertain the audience. But it would have had to have some basis in reality, I think. And it’s clear that some of them were strong, impressive characters - and not afraid to criticize their patrons if they felt it was needed.

Lastly, do look out for the way the poets use rhyme, alliteration, etc. to help achieve their aims - D. Myrddin Lloyd gives some good examples of this, and it’ll be useful for your essays if you’re doing the ‘write an appreciation’ one or the Dafydd ap Gwilym one.

So that’s all for now - let me know if you have any questions. And I’ll see you next week.