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Interpreting Irony in Medieval Celtic Narrative: The Case of *Culhwch ac Olwen*

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How do we read? What elements—beyond technical literacy—make us competent readers of texts? The crucial factor is our cultural experience, the set of attitudes and ideas and information by which each of us interprets the world; and of particular importance within this is our reading experience, the canon of other texts which have established our expectations about such matters as structure and genre and tone, which have taught us the possible meanings of these conventions, and which have given us criteria for judging the quality of individual works. The process of interpreting literature, then, whether oral or written, is always intertextual, conventional, and canonical.

As readers and interpreters of early Celtic literature, we are in perpetual trouble. Dealing with a new written literature created for a society just at the margin of literacy, we have too little access to literary contexts. We will never have enough information to find secure answers to the questions we must, as responsible critics, ask about each text: How—and why—did the author learn to write such a composition? What was the author's conception of the tradition in which he was writing? What was the relationship between the written work and the society's ambient oral tradition? For what audience was the author writing; in what fashion did that audience encounter the work (through solitary reading? public performance?); and how did the audience respond to it? Medieval *oral* tradition has of course disappeared, and the surviving literary record has gaps and is somewhat random. Only rarely can we identify even an approximate date and place of composition; more rarely still, an author.

Nevertheless, we have committed our scholarly lives to this obstreperous literature.¹ And like all readers, as Jonathan Culler puts it, 'we can make anything signify'.² But our hazardous situation

¹A version of this essay was read at the Eighth International Congress of Celtic Studies in Swansea, July, 1987. ²*Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, 1975), p. 138. Cf. Stanley Fish's sharper and more cynical caution in 'Short People Got No Reason to Live: Reading Irony', *Daedalus*, 112, no. 1 (Winter 1983), 184.

as Celticists—and I include among the hazards our very determination to find significance—calls on us to be aware of two pitfalls of interpretation: the misuse of what contextual information (literary and otherwise cultural) is available, and the misapplication of those near-unconscious assumptions about literature which we hold simply because we are university-trained members of our own society. In order to examine some of the ways Celtic literature has been read, and to make some recommendations, this essay will focus on a single narrative, the Welsh tale *Culhwch ac Olwen*, a text which, conveniently, raises in its most acute form nearly every problem of interpretation.³

If, as linguistic evidence seems to indicate, *Culhwch ac Olwen* dates from the mid-eleventh century, it is probably the earliest surviving example of a Middle Welsh prose narrative. Not only are its written predecessors lost, but, as Proinsias Mac Cana has cogently suggested, the story may have had very few predecessors indeed: the writing of Welsh narrative prose was probably a very recent phenomenon when *Culhwch ac Olwen* was composed.⁴ Typically, the tale appears in manuscripts with no indication of its performance context, or its authorship, or its place of writing. Although we have broad knowledge of Celtic traditions and styles, we have no direct information about the models or the conventions upon which the *Culhwch ac Olwen* author built his composition. Thus contextual interpretation of the story is extremely difficult.

The critical history of *Culhwch ac Olwen* illustrates how twentieth-century readers bring preconceptions to their reading that do not often fit early texts. We expect, for instance, to be able to find in a 'good' work of literature a philosophical meaning, a significant attitude towards the problems of human life; furthermore, we expect this meaning to be expressed throughout the work.⁵ Our critical heritage persuades us that in worthwhile literary texts we should be able to discover thematic unity. *Culhwch ac Olwen* has been criticized, therefore, for lacking a serious and consistent message. Gwyn Jones commented:

The Helping Companions use their gifts, display their qualities, fulfil their functions, and that these involve ferocity, cunning, treachery, the abuse

³I shall cite the text of *Culhwch ac Olwen* by column from *The White Book Mabinogion: Welsh Tales and Romances reproduced from the Peniarth Manuscripts*, edited by J. Gwenogvryn Evans (Pwllheli, 1907), pp. 226–54 (= WM). Columns 489 onwards are supplied from the Red Book of Hergest. [The edition by Idris Foster, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, edited by Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans (Cardiff, 1988), appeared after this article went to press.] The English translation will be cited from *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, translated and edited by Patrick K. Ford (Berkeley, 1977), pp. 119–157. ⁴*The Mabinogi*, Writers of Wales (Cardiff, 1977), p. 20. ⁵Culler, p. 115.

of hospitality and the most revolting cruelty, troubles the narrator not one whit. . . . Neither means nor end are ever questioned. His work is as far from compassion as from moral purpose.⁶

Brynley Roberts observed, more gently: 'The action is everything for this author, and not for him the deep moral view of human relations which inspired the author of the Four Branches'.⁷ Such estimations, however, are far more appealing than the sober preachiness projected onto this rollicking story by a recent reader who *did* find a Message:

The story demonstrates that it is a form of heroism to seek help—help from men and women, help from animals, help from those with supernatural powers. A related theme developed in *Culhwch ac Olwen* is the fruitfulness of fear: the emotions induced by fearful things can generate heroic response.⁸

Here the thirst for moral significance, given free expression by a reading divorced from concern for the tale's cultural setting, has largely obscured the text. A useful middle ground is provided by Stephen Knight, who reads *Culhwch* as a coherent, ideological text expressing the concerns of the Welsh aristocracy prior to the invasion of the Normans. Perhaps because he does not read the tale in the context of other Celtic literature, however, he sees no humour or parody in it, and leaves the validity of his interpretation open to question with such claims as this:

Just as the social collectivity of the family and the warband is a cultural unification against the isolated ferocity of enemies red in tooth and claw—human and animal, typified by Ysbaddaden in his lonely fortress—so the sheer skill and the interactive work of the warriors promote the notion that human culture can overcome the problems of nature.⁹

As modern readers, we tend also to praise works that maintain unity of tone and a coherent and balanced plot structure, though these characteristics are not typical of medieval literature.¹⁰ When a work does not fulfil our expectations, our response is usually to accuse its author of incompetence. And, indeed, most of the scholars who have written about *Culhwch ac Olwen* have assumed that its author was to some degree incompetent. '*Culhwch ac Olwen* shows

⁶*Kings, Beasts and Heroes* (London, 1972), p. 83. ⁷'Tales and Romances', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, 1, edited by A. O. H. Jarman and Gwilym Rees Hughes (Swansea, 1976), p. 219. ⁸Richard M. Loomis, in *The Romance of Arthur*, edited by James J. Wilhelm and Laila Zamuelis Gross (New York, 1984), p. 28. ⁹*Arthurian Literature and Society* (New York, 1983), p. 23. ¹⁰cf. William W. Ryding, *Structure in Medieval Narrative* (The Hague, 1971), pp. 115–116.

no organic growth, has no inevitable architecture. One could take sentences out, or write sentences in, almost anywhere If some parts of the narrative were transposed, only benefit would follow.¹¹ Thomas Parry (applying another modern criterion for literary excellence, authorial originality) said that the writer of *Culhwch* had patched together available materials and that, in contrast, the author of *The Four Branches* 'was too much of an artist to indulge in [such] stereotyped tricks'.¹² Even readers who markedly appreciate *Culhwch ac Olwen* have criticized its author for composing 'rather indiscriminately',¹³ or for not being 'able to discipline his abundant energy and wide knowledge'.¹⁴

When a story with an obviously important position in literary history causes so much frustration to its readers, it is little wonder that many have turned aside from interpretative readings of the tale. Scholars have tended to treat *Culhwch ac Olwen* primarily as a means rather than an end, as a source to be mined for evidence about Welsh culture: for Celtic sources of Arthurian tradition, for survivals of pagan Celtic mythology, for signs of cultural kinship and exchange between Ireland and Wales, for hints about the nature of other contemporary Welsh narratives. As Brynley Roberts states so well:

Part of the interest of *Culhwch ac Olwen* is the variety of styles which it employs, ranging from the brief statements of the opening section to a number of examples of typically swiftly moving and smooth narrative, so that the story can be viewed by the critic almost as an archeologist might examine the layers of his section.¹⁵

But this is a riskier enterprise than it looks; although treating a text as a source of cultural and historical information *seems* to avoid critical interpretation, in fact this approach depends on the assumption, usually unstated, that the text is transmitting authentic native material essentially unchanged. And this is an interpretation, and one with very far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the Celtic tradition.

Culhwch ac Olwen is indeed, as Gwyn Jones has put it, 'a granary bursting with the golden grain of Celtic tradition'.¹⁶ But it is important to notice the species of grain, and to investigate the circumstances under which that grain was preserved, before we cook it up into further theories about Celtic culture, literary history, or comparative mythology.

¹¹*Kings, Beasts and Heroes*, p. 77. ¹²*A History of Welsh Literature*, translated by H. Idris Bell (Oxford, 1955), p. 80. ¹³Ford, *Mabinogi*, p. 119. ¹⁴Roberts, 'Tales and Romances', p. 215. ¹⁵'From Traditional Tale to Literary Story: Middle Welsh Prose Narratives', in *The Craft of Fiction: Essays in Medieval Poetics*, edited by Leigh A. Arrathoon (Rochester, Michigan, 1984), p. 216. ¹⁶*Kings, Beasts and Heroes*, p. 80.

Let us experiment, then, by taking *Culhwch ac Olwen* seriously as a complete, self-consciously composed text. Let us set aside the images of its author as an undisciplined enthusiast, a flawed retailer of the second-hand, a failed philosopher, and assume—in the absence of models that provide evidence to the contrary—that his tale is a competent production, created as he intended, in a controlled relationship to literary forms with which he was familiar, for the satisfaction of an actual contemporary audience. The assumption of competence is crucial. If we believe that the *Culhwch* author was indeed in control of his text, then we must regard the tale's treatment of various traditional Celtic literary forms as deliberate, even if those forms are not echoed precisely; thus we will have to analyse carefully the relationship between *Culhwch ac Olwen* and those cognate literary conventions to which it has been connected. And as far as possible, given the limitations of available cultural knowledge, we should test our interpretation by seeking to reconstruct plausible contexts in which this particular text would have functioned as a competent work. I propose in this essay to try out such an interpretative approach—which seems appropriate for any culturally and/or temporally alien literature—by suggesting a reading of *Culhwch ac Olwen*.

The most fruitful studies of *Culhwch ac Olwen* have concentrated on the tale's reflection of structures, motifs, and conventions found elsewhere in Irish and Welsh tradition, as well as in the international folk narrative repertoire.¹⁷ Most have emphasized the story's closeness to oral tradition, and, in particular, the similarity between the framework of its plot and the international folktale *Six Go Through the Whole World* (AT 513A), in which the hero sets forth in quest of a princess and is joined by extraordinary companions who perform for him the qualifying tasks set by the princess's father.¹⁸

The trouble with comparing *Culhwch ac Olwen* to an oral *märchen*, however, is that then one expects it to proceed like an oral *märchen*; and it does not. Its plot is complicated by the appearance of Arthur and his court (in their first manifestation in vernacular prose narrative), by the incorporation of a large number of subtales,

¹⁷The most detailed such study is Doris Edel, *Helden auf Freiersfüßen: 'Tochmarc Emire' und 'Mal y kavas Culhwch Olwen': Studien zur frühen inselkeltischen Erzähltradition* (Amsterdam, 1980). ¹⁸Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, Folklore Fellows Communications, 184 (Helsinki, 1973), pp. 180–81. The first detailed study of international folk motifs in *Culhwch ac Olwen* was by Kenneth H. Jackson, in *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, The Gregynog Lectures 1961 (Cardiff, 1961). It should be noted, however, that Doris Edel in *Helden auf Freiersfüßen* regards *Culhwch's* international *märchen* structure as far less significant than its connections with the learned Celtic tradition.

and by numerous violations of our expectations of oral narrative. Of the many specialized gifted helpers named in Culhwch's list, for instance, none actually takes part in the accomplishment of any task. And of the thirty-nine separate tasks assigned by Olwen's ogre father, Ysbaddaden Chief Giant, Culhwch's band performs (in very different sequence) only sixteen, and also does three tasks that the giant has not even required. Noting such anomalies, Kenneth Jackson regarded the tale as 'badly corrupted', an 'ill-remembered' product of 'very inferior tellers'.¹⁹

If, however, we now assume that the *Culhwch* author was in control of his composition, we must take seriously his choice to violate expected folktale patterns. There is a playful self-consciousness about conventions throughout the tale, which is evident, for instance, in the handling of the international motif of the Extraordinary Companions, the hero's miraculously skilled helpers (motif F601). Normally these include a speedy runner, a marksman, a prodigious eater and/or drinker, a man with acute hearing, a keen tracker, and so forth. In his catalogue of guarantors Culhwch includes among Arthur's helpful retinue this usual cast (in fact, doublets and triplets of it), but there are also some characters with more bizarre gifts: Uchdryd Farf Draws ('Cross-Beard'), who could 'fling his red, well-sprouted beard across the fifty rafters that were in Arthur's hall', and Gwefl son of Gwastad ('Lip son of Flat'), whose extraordinary skill was his ability to pout: 'on days when he was sad, he would let his lower lip sag down to his navel, while the other would be a cowl for his head'.²⁰ The fact that none of these listed helpers ever takes part in Culhwch's quest is not an example of the narrator's forgetfulness; rather, their absence from the action calls attention to the playfulness of the narrator's invocation of the motif. The humour comes from play with the form; the *convention* of skilled helpers is being parodied.

The prime example of this kind of play with folktale form comes during Culhwch's negotiations with Ysbaddaden, as the giant is stipulating the tasks which have to be accomplished before the wedding with Olwen can take place. Instead of the three tasks conventional in the international folktale, which are named and accomplished one at a time, Culhwch is given thirty-nine impossible missions, assigned in a relentless torrent, with no time in between for their accomplishment. After the giant has growled out each task, Culhwch, unruffled, replies, 'It is easy for me to accomplish that, though you may not

¹⁹*International Popular Tale*, pp. 126–27. ²⁰Ford, *Mabinogi*, p. 130; WM 468.7–11; 467.36–468.3. Patrick Sims-Williams points out that the Gwefl passage, being in fact an interpolation in the White Book, may have been a late-fourteenth-century addition to the tale: 'The Significance of the Irish Personal Names in *Culhwch ac Olwen*', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 29 (1980–82), 600–20 (p. 606).

think so'. 'Though you accomplish that', roars the giant, 'here is something you won't accomplish . . .'. 'It is easy for me to accomplish that, though you may not think so'²¹—and so on, until the audience must have been incapacitated by the comic surfeit.

The fact that there are so many tasks, and that they are not all completed in the course of the story, need not indicate authorial incompetence. In an oral folktale, such tasks function as part of a mnemonic structure which dictates the plot order, but in a written text there is no pressure from mnemonic necessity. The author is left utterly free to manipulate rhythm and plot structure. At this point in *Culhwch ac Olwen* he seems to have done so principally to create the humour of that endless, hyperbolic bargaining routine. Again, he makes his audience attend not to the story's events *per se*, but to the game he is playing with the traditional forms.

If we read the tale as a self-conscious text, we see that *Culhwch ac Olwen* treats many of its other identifiable folktale motifs with deadpan humour. Take the opening circumstances, for instance. Shortly after Culhwch's birth, his mother sickens unto death, and before she dies her husband the king promises not to remarry until a two-headed briar grows on her grave. As soon as the queen dies, the king's response is single-minded, abrupt, and unsentimental: every morning he sends a boy to check the growth on the grave!—every morning for seven years, in fact, at the end of which the requisite briar is found. Immediately the king takes counsel about finding a bride. Here is the scene, *in toto*:

'I know a marriage that would suit you well', said one of his counsellors, 'the wife of King Doged'.

They decided to seek her.

They killed the king and carried his wife back home with them, and her daughter with her. Then they took possession of the king's land.²²

While, on the one hand, deathbed prohibitions and abductions of brides are typical international folktale motifs with many reflexes in Celtic narrative (motifs C160 and R10.1), these perfunctory treatments seem deliberately askew. (Even in the somewhat similar situation at the beginning of the Middle Irish *Fingal Rónáin*—a serious, non-parodic narrative—the laconically narrated remarriage does not involve the murder of the bride's current husband.)²³ Accustomed to other treatments of bereavement and betrothal in folk narrative, the medieval audience might have seen *Culhwch*'s naked formulas

²¹Ford, *Mabinogi*, pp. 137–38; WM 480.8–11, etc. ²²Ford, *Mabinogi*, p. 122; WM 453.15–24. ²³*Fingal Rónáin and Other Stories*, edited by David Greene, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series, 16 (Dublin, 1955), p. 3; 'Fingal Rónáin', edited and translated by Kuno Meyer, *Revue celtique*, 13 (1892), 372–75.

as a humorous contrast with their usual appearance, clothed in more acceptable human emotions and behaviours. Such a self-conscious contrast occurs again at the end of the tale, when Ysbaddaden has been forced to yield up his daughter Olwen for marriage—the fated precondition for his own death (international motif E765.4.1). For a moment the giant himself becomes a grudging commentator on the course of the plot. Culhwch asks,

‘Is your daughter mine now?’

‘She is’, he replied, ‘but don’t thank me for that, thank Arthur, who brought it about for you. If I’d had my way you never would have got her. Now the time has come to end my life’.²⁴

Ysbaddaden is actually made to prompt the hero to end the tale according to pattern. And again the audience is being entertained not simply with a skillfully told traditional *märchen*, but also with a wry parody of that tradition.

The structure of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, then, suggests the *märchen*, but on closer inspection the story cannot be regarded as a transcription of a folktale. It also suggests other elements of medieval Welsh oral tradition, in its ubiquitous and unmistakable echoes of the repertoire and style of the *cyfarwyddiaid*, the professional court poets and storytellers who were responsible for maintaining the native artistic heritage: the great poetry, the mythological tales, the heroic stories, the developing Arthurian canon.²⁵ But here again, the available models do not correspond well enough to what we find in *Culhwch ac Olwen* for us to claim that the tale accurately reflects the traditional court repertoire. There is pervasive hyperbole, a constant shifting of tone and rhythm, an interplay of voices that is foreign to what Bakhtin has called the ‘straightforward genres’.²⁶ The vignettes that introduce the youthful hero Culhwch, for instance, are marvelously mixed. First he is a lad blushing at the thought of loving a woman; then he is riding forth in formulaically perfect heroic equipment; then this blushing, graceful lad is demanding entrance into Arthur’s court with the threat of a shout that will cause the kingdom’s pregnant women to abort and all others to be barren; and, once admitted, he boorishly rides his horse into the banqueting hall, and (presumably from horseback) delivers a greeting to Arthur that is a consummate model of courtesy. There is no attempt to create a consistent portrait of a heroic—or clumsy, or naive—protagonist;

²⁴Ford, *Mabinogi*, p. 157; WM 506.36–507.4 (from RBH). ²⁵cf. Mac Cana, *Mabinogi*, p. 71. For a comprehensive discussion of the tale’s relationship to Celtic literary tradition, see Edel, *Helden auf Freiersfüßen*, pp. 148–206 and 243–52. ²⁶M. M. Bakhtin, ‘From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse’, in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, 1981), pp. 44–83.

rather, the juxtaposition of so many standard young-hero themes, some satiric, some not, each an echo of scenes in other Celtic narratives, constitutes a triumph of literary irony.

The author’s game extends to every aspect of medieval Welsh tradition reflected in *Culhwch ac Olwen*: to the rhetorical flights and boastful claims reminiscent of the bardic stance, to the materials of myth, of Celtic epic, and of Arthurian narrative that constitute the tale. Everywhere, and at every level, from sound and language to narrative structure, there is play, and the game shifts as we listen.²⁷ As Culhwch’s catalogue of Arthur’s retinue stretches out, crammed with outrageously alliterating, rhyming (Bwlch, Cyfwlch, Sefwlch), and paradigmatic (Drwg, Gwaeth, Gwaethaf Oll) clusters of names and tantalizing shreds of stories, it evolves from a mischievous exaggeration of the heroic convention of demanding sureties to a parody of the Celtic court poet’s bravura advertisement of his repertoire.²⁸ Though the catalogue is put into Culhwch’s mouth, it is patently designed to make hyperbolic claims about the narrator’s competence and knowledge; the discourse is deliberately allowed to slip here, as Culhwch alludes to events (the death of Cei, the battle of Camlan, and so forth) which have not even taken place at the time of this recitation. Such a phenomenon underscores the evidence that both Irish and Welsh court entertainers were expected to recite catalogues of their repertoires for their patrons.²⁹ One must agree with Doris Edel that ‘the presence in [the CO] catalogue of numerous figures with fantastic and burlesque qualities seems to have been inspired by methods current in the intellectual tradition of Celtic Britain. These methods—etymological speculation, juggling with multiple meanings and multiple names, and so forth— . . . are used by the *cyfarwydd* above all to entertain, to amuse, and baffle his audience with his unrestrained imagination’.³⁰ I would add also that the narrator of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, in his catalogues of helpers and

²⁷cf. Marged Haycock, ‘“Some Talk of Alexander and Some of Hercules”’: Three Early Medieval Poems from the Book of Taliesin’, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 13 (Summer 1987), 12–13, for a comparison between the rhyming play with place-names in the Book of Taliesin and *Culhwch ac Olwen*. ²⁸Since the intermediate stages of the development of Culhwch’s catalogue are nowhere documented, I mean to suggest only that this evolution represents a typical audience response, and not that it is part of the history of the composition of the catalogue. It is quite possible, however, that the parody of bardic claims may have intensified over time, as the catalogue lengthened. Patrick Sims-Williams has demonstrated that the catalogue ‘may have been interpolated with new names at every stage up to the writing of the White Book in the mid fourteenth century’ (‘Significance of the Irish Personal Names’, p. 606). ²⁹cf. Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1980); Rachel Bromwich, *Triodd Ynys Prydein*, second edition (Cardiff, 1978), pp. lxxii–lxxiii and lxxviii–lxxix. ³⁰Doris Edel, ‘The Catalogues in *Culhwch ac Olwen* and Insular Celtic Learning’, *BBCS*, 30 (1983), 262.

tasks, is constructing a playful, double-voiced ironic commentary upon the typical manners and products of the native Welsh learned class.³¹

The epic tradition, too, is never presented seriously for long. The portrait of young Culhwch setting forth on his quest seems at first a textbook example of traditional Celtic formulaic rhetoric, such as we find frequently in the Irish sagas, but as the description proceeds there evolves what Proinsias Mac Cana has called 'a certain over-plus', 'a delicate hyperbole':³²

The boy went off on a four-year-old steed with a gleaming grey head, sturdy-legged, hollow-hoofed, a tubular gold bridle around his head, and a precious golden saddle upon his back A sword in his hand twice the length of a man's forearm from ridge to edge: it would bring blood from the wind, would be quicker than the quickest dewdrop drops when June's dew is wettest Before him, a pair of spotted white-breasted hunting hounds, with thick reddish-gold neck torques on each from shoulder-top to ear. The one on the left would bound to the right, and the one on the right would bound to the left, and thus like two terns they played about him. The steed's four hooves would hurl four clods into the air above his head—like four swallows, now up, now down.

And then the rhetorical flight ends as the narrator tells us—with a markedly mercenary zeal?³³—the *prices* of Culhwch's gear:

A purple four-cornered mantle about him, with a reddish-gold apple mounted at each corner, each apple worth one hundred cows. The valuable gold in his buskins and stirrups from the top of his knee to the tip of his toe was worth three hundred cows.³⁴

There is greater undercutting of heroic style and values elsewhere, particularly in connection with Arthur's champion, Cei, whom Doris Edel has compared to Cú Chulainn as 'the exemplary hero who is prepared to defend the people under his protection until his own death'.³⁵ Cei does indeed represent the old-style Celtic champion in *Culhwch ac Olwen*, but the portrait is frequently tongue-in-cheek. True to the tradition of battle-passionate Celtic warriors, for

³¹Although I would disagree with Patrick Sims-Williams that the catalogue of helpers functions 'to enhance the importance of Arthur and his court', I find resonant his more fanciful comment on the catalogue: 'it is hard not to suspect its author of a provocative, Dadaist delight in bringing the fiction to a standstill' ('Significance of the Irish Personal Names', p. 602). ³²*Mabinogi*, pp. 73–74. ³³This sense of the humour of 'mercenary' juxtapositions may well be a modern anachronism; Patrick Sims-Williams points out to me that *Poems of Taliesin*, nos I and IV, for instance, also sound highly materialistic to modern ears. ³⁴Ford, *Mabinogi*, p. 123; WM 454.34–455.39. ³⁵'The Arthur of "Culhwch ac Olwen" as a Figure of Epic-Heroic Tradition', *Reading Medieval Studies*, 9 (1983), 6.

instance, Cei generates heat. But his heat is a shade too literal to be seriously heroic: 'When it would be raining hardest whatever he held in his hand would be dry for a fist-length all around because of the greatness of his passion; and when his companions were coldest he would be fuel to kindle their fire'.³⁶ In such cases as these in *Culhwch*, simultaneously the audience is reminded of the great old heroic attributes—magnificent trappings, furious fighting skill—and is made to chuckle at them, as they are suddenly juxtaposed to the real, everyday world of evaluation and barter and (that perpetual concern in Celtic countries) keeping dry on a wet day.

It is not only the heroes who are mocked in *Culhwch ac Olwen*: the old gods themselves become buffoons. Ysbaddaden Chief Giant has often been regarded as a Welsh reflex of the malignant Balar of pagan Irish mythology. The two giants share a distinctive trait: they cannot open their eyes unless their henchmen raise their eyelids with forked branches. But we should be wary of assuming that we can get any reliable information about pagan British mythology from Ysbaddaden's role in *Culhwch ac Olwen*: the appearances of the evil ogre are all scenes of custard-pie humour. I cite here only his complaints—masterpieces of heavy-handed comic understatement—when he is wounded by Culhwch and his companions with his own poisoned spears. At the first cast, which pierces his knee-cap: 'All the worse shall I walk the hillside; the poison iron has stung me like the bite of a horse-fly!' At the second, which passes through his chest and out the small of his back: 'When I go up a hill I will suffer chest pains, stomach ache, and even indigestion!' And at the third cast, conventionally the mortal one, which passes through his eyeball (his eyelids having been raised for the occasion) and out the back of his neck: 'As long as I live my vision shall be the worse; when I walk against the wind, my eyes will weep, and every moon shall cause me headache and giddiness'.³⁷

Traditionally, *Culhwch ac Olwen* has been valued most for its testimony about early Arthurian lore in Wales. Given the pervasive pastiche, however, how far can we trust such evidence? No further, I would suggest, than we can find corroboration in other sources. While we certainly *can* gather from *Culhwch ac Olwen* some general hints about the ingredients of Arthurian tradition in Wales—some names of Arthur's heroes, allusions to such events as the cauldron quest, the battle of Camlan, the death of Cei, boar hunts, and so forth—the author's handling of these traditions, too, has more than a hint of irony.

³⁶Ford, *Mabinogi*, p. 132; WM 471.6–14. ³⁷Ford, *Mabinogi*, pp. 136–37; WM 477.29–479.15.

One of the most extended episodes is Arthur's hunting of the boar Twrch Trwyth—a story whose archaism (it is mentioned in the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*) has delighted modern scholars. Twrch Trwyth is seen by some as a former Celtic swine divinity (as he may be);³⁸ and the hunt in *Culhwch ac Olwen* has been described as having an epic quality comparable to *Moby Dick*, Faulkner's 'The Bear', and the Calydonian boar hunt in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.³⁹ Indeed it might have had this quality as a separate tale in Welsh oral tradition. But in *Culhwch ac Olwen* this exploit, like all the others, has been gleefully cobbled into the wonder-tale framework, and its ostensible purpose, therefore, is like that of all the tasks set by Ysbaddaden Chief Giant: to prepare for the wedding feast of Culhwch and Olwen. In this case, the boar is being pursued not for the defence of Britain, not for the winning of some supernatural boon for Arthur's realm, but only because he is carrying, between his ears, the razor, shears, and comb necessary for the barbering of the Chief Giant. The heroes' final triumph, as they pursue the boar and his seven piglets in a murderous course from Ireland to Wales to Devon and Cornwall and off into the sea and the unknown, is to grab from him a comb.

Indeed, *Culhwch ac Olwen* may be the world's first tonsorial mock-epic (taking *The Rape of the Lock*, perhaps, as the second). We recognize, as once again the narrative thumps down to hard ground from a rhetorical flight, that barbering is a strong theme running through *Culhwch ac Olwen*'s plot. Culhwch's first request to Arthur has been that he cut his hair,⁴⁰ and from then on there has been recurrent attention to tonsorial matters. The heroes approach Ysbaddaden Chief Giant 'majestically, with fine combs set in their hair'.⁴¹ They perform barbering tasks, like plucking the beard of the unfortunate Dillus Farfawg to make a hound's leash. And at the very end the villain, Ysbaddaden, is prepared for his death by a grim shave, as 'Caw of Britain came to shave his beard—and his flesh and

³⁸Ford, *Mabinogi*, pp. 15–17. See also Eric P. Hamp's recent studies of Celtic pig terminology, in the first of which he proposes that 'Culhwch literally was a pig', and that he was 'divine, in a class with Twrch Trwyth': 'Culhwch, the Swine', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 41 (1986), 257–58; 'The Pig in Ancient Northern Europe', in *Proto-Indo-European: The Archaeology of a Linguistic Problem: Studies in Honor of Marija Gimbutas*, edited by Susan Nacev Skomal and Edgar C. Polomé (Washington, 1987), pp. 185–90. ³⁹Kings, *Beasts and Heroes*, pp. 102–19. ⁴⁰This was a ritual acknowledgement of kinship or adoption; a similar incident is alluded to in 'Nennius', *Historia Brittonum*, Chapter 39, when St Germanus acts as spiritual father to Vortigern's son by incest, after Vortigern has refused to accept from the boy a razor, scissors, and comb with which to cut his hair. Cf. J. Loth, 'Sur un passage du *Mabinogi* de Culhwch et Olwen', *RC*, 11 (1890), 495–96; Idris Llewelyn Foster, 'Culhwch and Olwen and Rhonabwy's Dream', in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, edited by Roger Sherman Loomis (Oxford, 1959), p. 33. ⁴¹Ford, *Mabinogi*, p. 136; WM 477.38–478.1.

skin down to the bone, and his two ears'.⁴² Stephen Knight has proposed that the pervasive emphasis on grooming in *Culhwch ac Olwen* represents 'a means of controlling hirsute nature; a part of attaining the glamour associated with culture and honour—and ultimately with tribal power'.⁴³ Such a deep cultural message probably is coded into many features of the story; but I would suggest that the author's primary purpose in presenting this theme was playful.

Trying to reconstruct pre-literate Welsh tradition from *Culhwch ac Olwen* alone, then, would be like trying to reconstruct the Fionn cycle, *Buile Shuibhne*, and the dime-store Western novel from Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Any clear-eyed description of the story must take account of what Proinsias Mac Cana has called *Culhwch ac Olwen*'s 'benevolent pastiche',⁴⁴ and must recognize how thoroughly the story pokes fun at the range of traditional Welsh oral culture, from popular to aristocratic. Nothing was immune to this author's knowing chuckle—not high heroic deeds, not the brandished rhetoric of the bards, not the ubiquitous folktale. In a single work he corroborates Bakhtin's contention that in the Middle Ages, parodic-travestying literature 'constituted a fully articulated superstructure of laughter, erected over all serious straightforward genres'.⁴⁵ And parody is of course a form of irony, 'an exaggerated imitation of a style or genre in order to imply criticism, resting like irony on a discrepancy between ostensible meaning (a work in the genre imitated) and real meaning (a criticism of what is imitated)'.⁴⁶ Thus an ironic reading of *Culhwch ac Olwen*—one which emphasizes the possibilities of intentional discrepancies between apparent and covert meanings—seems an appropriate response to the text.

Irony, as Stanley Fish has pointed out, is an interpretative strategy, a way of reading.⁴⁷ It does not inhere in a text at the linguistic level; its presence or absence depends, rather, on the audience's assumptions about the author's intentions—and those assumptions depend, as I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, on cultural context. Thus we cannot stop with the decision to read *Culhwch ac Olwen* ironically. First we need to look at the situation from a different point of view—to speculate not only about the author's intentions, now, but also about his audience. Once we have described the text and seen its benevolent mockery, we must go on to make sense of this perception by trying to reconstruct a plausible context in which *Culhwch ac Olwen* would have functioned as a competent work. What can we conclude about its author, its audience, its performance situation?

⁴²Ford, *Mabinogi*, p. 157; WM 508.31–34. ⁴³*Arthurian Literature and Society*, p. 21. ⁴⁴*Mabinogi*, p. 74. ⁴⁵*Dialogic Imagination*, p. 73. ⁴⁶D. H. Green, *Irony in the Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 10–11. ⁴⁷'Short People', p. 189.

We can be certain, to begin with, that the story was written to be read aloud to an audience, and not primarily to be enjoyed by solitary readers. There is no evidence of a significant lay readership, as opposed to a listening public, in Europe in the eleventh century.⁴⁸ Oral delivery is consistent with the style of *Culhwch ac Olwen* (consider, for instance, its wonderful alliterative runs, meant to be heard) and with features of its organization (such as the assignment of the thirty-nine tasks, discussed above). The performance situation for which the author was writing, then, was in some ways like that of storytelling; and we may infer from this that the author was aware of the need to maintain immediate rapport with an audience, and that the author knew the nature of his audience and could count on them to bring certain kinds of literary experience to bear on his story as they heard it. He could count on their familiarity with *märchen*, with the performances of bards and *cyfarwyddiaid*, with the traditional repertoire of heroic, mythical, and Arthurian tales. That same literary competence that enabled him to write *Culhwch ac Olwen* enabled his audience to understand it, to recognize and appreciate his play with the old forms.

But why *did* he play with these old forms, thereby holding them, as it were, at arm's length? Presumably, at least in part because he wished to express his distance from them, and by so doing, to please his audience. They were not exactly *his* forms. Although he could imitate the *märchen*, he did not feel bound to obey its conventions. And although he could echo the bardic repertoire, there are signs that he was not trained as a professional bard. Rachel Bromwich has pointed out, for instance, that he seems to have had 'no very intimate knowledge of' the Welsh triads, such as a bard would have had. Of the two triads in *Culhwch ac Olwen* which have clear stylistic kinship to those in *Trioedd Ynys Prydain*, she regards one—the Three Men Who Escaped from the Battle of Camlan—as a 'burlesque invention by the narrator', and the other—the Three Exalted Prisoners—as perhaps 'an ignorant travesty' of the triad 'in its correct form'. Although I would suggest that the second triad might be a travesty, but not an ignorant one, I quite agree with her conclusion 'that *Culhwch ac Olwen* originated in an entirely different milieu from that in which the triads were evolved'.⁴⁹

One can most easily picture the *Culhwch* author in a lord's court. His familiar world is privileged and cosmopolitan. He knows court entertainment, court finery, court manners. He knows the speech of gatekeepers, petitioners, and kings, and the magnificent principle of lordship that Arthur articulates: 'We are nobles as long as anyone

⁴⁸Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, 1983), p. 26. ⁴⁹*Trioedd Ynys Prydain*, pp. xcii–xciii.

seeks us out; the greater the favour we bestow, the greater shall be our nobility, our fame, and our honour'. But this literary eye on the court world has always an ironic glint: the speaker is the same Arthur who responds magnanimously to Culhwch's request for a favour: 'You shall have what your head and tongue may claim, as long as the wind dries, the rain wets, the sun moves, as far as land and sea reach'—but then appends an extensive list of exceptions: '—except my ship and my mantle, Caledfwlch my sword, Rhongomiant my spear, Wynebgrwrthucher my shield, Carnwennan my knife, and Gwenhwyfar my wife'.⁵⁰

The author of *Culhwch* thus speaks with a double voice, at once seeming to embrace the literary conventions of his native Wales and to call them into question, seeming at once to admire and to hold himself aloof from the court and its traditional values. In this dual consciousness, he mirrors the audience for which he composed. Eleventh-century Welsh courts, though certainly ruder in their trappings and manners than, say, French ones, were not unsophisticated. They were places of culture contact and diplomatic negotiation. Beset over time by the Irish, the Vikings, and the English, Welsh lords had intermarried with these peoples and had learned to make cross-cultural alliances in their private wars. Wendy Davies points out that this phenomenon increased markedly in the century preceding the coming of the Normans—in the same period which included the composition of *Culhwch ac Olwen*. 'This must betoken the end of the hard lines of cultural separation—the English were no longer the massed enemies of the mass of Welsh'.⁵¹ Historical Welsh dealings with potentially hostile and culturally diverse strangers are surely reflected in the fun-house mirror of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, which ironically juxtaposes ancient mythic entities and the 'modern' figure of Arthur's interpreter, Gwrhyr Gwastad Ieithoedd, sent to parley with a menacing pig and a firebreathing ogre herdsman.⁵² Furthermore, we may see in the eclecticism of *Culhwch*'s catalogue of guarantors—which invokes characters from Ireland, Greece, France, Brittany, and 'beyond the Tyrrhenian sea', as well as from all over Britain—a claim to international sophistication.⁵³

By the eleventh century in Wales, therefore, the cosmopolitan and the parochial were blended; there was no homogeneous 'folk'

⁵⁰Ford, *Mabinogi*, pp. 125–26; WM 458.26–30; 459.25–36. ⁵¹*Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1982), p. 115. ⁵²Ford, *Mabinogi*, pp. 133 and 153; WM 472 and 500. ⁵³Marged Haycock, 'Preiddeu Annwn' and the Figure of Taliesin' (*Studia Celtica*, 18/19 (1983–84), 56–58) discusses the 'braggadocio element' of *Preiddeu Annwn* in 'stressing the omniscience of the Taliesin figure, his familiarity with mythology and legend, his Otherworld connections, his mastery of exotic learning'; cf. also her study of the Taliesin figure in 'Some Talk of Alexander and Some of Hercules' pp. 8–11 and 21–22.

audience at court for literary entertainment. The audience that would—much earlier—have given more unquestioning attention to the oral performance of *pencerdd*, *bardd*, or *cyfarwydd* had changed to include multiple points of view, multiple norms, and even multiple nationalities. In an era in which Welshmen allied with strangers against Welshmen, and the territories defended by the historical Arthur had long since been lost to the English, literary portrayal of native warrior champions must inevitably have carried an ironic double consciousness. A complex blend of admiration and nostalgia, boredom and irreversible detachment, could have characterized the Welsh court audience's attitudes towards the whole range of native literary tradition that is variously manipulated in *Culhwch ac Olwen*.

In this situation, the *Culhwch* author's ironic treatment of his tale's ingredients would have been an effective entertainment strategy. A listener weary of the old conventions, but still aware of their importance to his heritage, would have taken renewed delight in their wry evocation in *Culhwch ac Olwen*—and need not have felt that his tradition had been devalued. Irony, as Wayne Booth has observed, is not at all like satire in its effects. It is not aimed at victims; indeed, with ironic literature, as Booth has put it in a much-quoted passage,

the building of amiable communities is often far more important than the exclusion of naive victims. Often the predominant emotion when reading . . . ironies is that of joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits. The author . . . is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumes *my* capacity for dealing with it, and—most important—because he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my [interpretation of his meaning] is to be built.⁵⁴

Thus to treat native Welsh tradition ironically in *Culhwch ac Olwen* was neither to exclude the outsiders and innovators nor to offend the traditionalists, but to share a sly wink with both, and to leave the interpretation of that wink quite open.

In treating oral tradition ironically, the *Culhwch* author was able to express both his affection for native tradition and his sophisticated awareness that the modern world had moved beyond simple acceptance of it—and he allowed his audience, too, to maintain this dual attitude. His manipulation of oral tradition was not naive or incompetent; instead, his adaptation of such material was strategically designed to serve a society with an increasingly pluralistic world view.

In conclusion, I would suggest that although the example of

⁵⁴A *Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, 1974), p. 28.

Culhwch ac Olwen is an extreme one, the possibility of ironic self-consciousness inheres in all early Celtic written literature, partly because of increasingly cosmopolitan awareness in both Ireland and Wales, but also partly as an inevitable consequence of the act of writing itself, and of the effects of writing in a society whose operations and modes of thought were still far more oral than literate.

This is not to imply that *oral* literature cannot be ironic; of course it can be, and often is. And oral narrators can easily play games of parody and hyperbole such as we admire in *Culhwch ac Olwen*. One modern teller particularly gifted in such modes was the Irish Eamon a Búrc of Cárna, Co. Galway; witness, for instance, this 'run' describing the arrival of the hero Céatach at the house of the giant Steel Skull:

When he struck the challenge pole demanding battle, he didn't leave a foal in a mare, a lamb in a sheep, a child in a woman, or a kid in a she-goat that he didn't turn around nine times in their mothers' womb and back again. He didn't leave an old castle without demolishing, a new castle without bending, an old tree without breaking, or a new tree without twisting.⁵⁵

Literate composition, however, by removing the immediacy of direct communication, opens up a different range of ironic possibilities. The early Irish or Welsh author could contemplate his text critically with new leisure, could see himself as clearly separate from its narrator. Working with the familiar materials and genres of oral culture, yet translating these into a new medium and contemplating them outside their normal performance situation, the author inevitably needed to cope with a new strangeness, a new sense of distance. 'Any genuine act of translation', to quote George Steiner, 'is, in one regard at least, a transparent absurdity, an endeavour to go backwards up the escalator of time and to re-enact voluntarily what was a contingent motion of spirit.'⁵⁶ And in that absurdity, that impossibility of complete translation into written language, lay a strong stimulus both to creative innovation and to ironic vision.

For Bakhtin, also, the evolution of written literature is a phenomenon of linguistic and cultural self-consciousness:

The creating artist [begins] to look at language from the outside, with another's eyes, from the point of view of a potentially different language and style. It is, after all, precisely in the light of another potential language or style that a given straightforward style is parodied, travestied, ridiculed.

⁵⁵'Céatach', in *Folktales of Ireland*, edited and translated by Sean O'Sullivan (Chicago, 1966), p. 39. ⁵⁶*After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York, 1975), p. 71.

The creating consciousness stands, as it were, on the boundary line between languages and styles.⁵⁷

It is no accident that the development of written literature in Ireland and Wales accompanied many other developments—including the introduction and establishment of Christianity, and contact with a range of foreign languages and cultures—that enormously complicated the traditional Celtic image of the world.⁵⁸ That consciousness of multiple voices and multiple views which is nurtured by the shift from orality to literacy was also nourished by other contemporary modes of engaging with the unfamiliar. We can detect this multiple awareness frequently in early Celtic literature. It is implicit, for instance, in the scenes devoted to the comic grotesqueries of the Dagda in *Cath Maige Tuired*. We sense it also in the contrasting tones with which Cú Chulainn is portrayed in the Ulster sagas: at one point he is the serious, single champion holding off an army, at the next a raging little boy being thrown into vats of ice water to temper his fury. And we surely recognize a strong ironic vein in the handling of Celtic tradition in *The Four Branches* from the very beginning, as the Otherworld visitors—first Arawn, then Rhiannon—chastise the noble Pwyll for his violations of honour and good sense. (His very name, *pwyll* 'sense, discretion, intelligence,' carries a pointed irony at this stage of the story.) Ironic interplay of opposing perspectives can also function as a structural feature of medieval Celtic texts, as Joseph Falaky Nagy has shown in the case of the frame-tale *Acallam na Senórach*, which juxtaposes mythic and historical, oral and literate, pagan and Christian, Insular and Continental traditions.⁵⁹

At times, an author's double-voiced response to tradition is explicit, as, for instance, in the twelfth-century redactor's famous twin colophons to the Book of Leinster *Táin*, which demonstrate a dramatic split of mind. The first reads

Bendacht ar cech óen mebraigfes go hindraic Táin amlaid seo 7 ná tuillfe cruth aile furri.

⁵⁷*Dialogic Imagination*, p. 60. See also the discussion of the inter-relationship between the development of literacy and the growth of scepticism and critical thinking in Jack Goody and Ian Watt, 'The Consequences of Literacy', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 5 (1962–63), 304–45. ⁵⁸Patrick Sims-Williams has demonstrated that in early Britain, 'as on the Continent, there may have been a plurality of attitudes to the vernacular languages and literatures', and has shown the ironic possibilities of Gildas's juxtaposition of native and Latin imagery: 'Gildas and Vernacular Poetry', in *Gildas: New Approaches*, edited by Michael Lapidge and David Dumville, *Studies in Celtic History*, 5 (Woodbridge, 1984), pp. 169–92 (p. 179). ⁵⁹'Compositional Concerns in the *Acallam na Senórach*', in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*, edited by Liam Breatnach, Kim McCone, and Donnchadh Ó Corráin (Maynooth, forthcoming).

A blessing on every one who shall faithfully memorise the *Táin* as it is written here and shall not add any other form to it.

The second:

Sed ego qui scripsi hanc historiam aut uerius fabulam quibusdam fidem in hac historia aut fabula non accommo. Quaedam enim ibi sunt praest(r)igia demonum, quaedam autem figmenta poetica, quaedam similia uero, quaedam non, quaedam ad delectationem stultorum.

But I who have written this story, or rather this fable, give no credence to the various incidents related in it. For some things in it are the deceptions of demons, others poetic figments; some are probable, others improbable; while still others are intended for the delectation of foolish men.⁶⁰

On the one hand—thinking in Irish, the language of the ancient oral tradition in which he had been raised—the author knew that such stories, in artfully framed words, had sacred power, and, passed along faithfully, could confer blessings. But on the other hand—thinking in Latin, the written language of the monastic schools—he had been trained to be sceptical, to withhold full assent from his vernacular heritage. His contradictory response to the *Táin* stands as a paradigm of the heteroglossia of medieval Celtic literacy.⁶¹

This essay has attempted to illustrate a way of reading medieval Celtic literature. Because *Culhwch ac Olwen* so blatantly challenges contemporary assumptions about literary competence, and because it alludes to such a diversity of medieval Celtic traditions, it seems a particularly appropriate text on which to try out a new approach. If we attend to the example of this story, we will be sensitive to the dialogic nature of early Celtic literature, and we will remain alert to the possibility that irony was a major means by which Celtic authors dealt with complexities of world view, developing in their writing what Brian Stock has called 'a new technology of the mind'.⁶²

⁶⁰*Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster*, edited and translated by Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin, 1967), pp. 136 and 272. ⁶¹In Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis, all the world since Eden has been characterized to some degree by 'heteroglossia': each group has its own language, conceptual system, world view, which is alien to all others. Furthermore, because of combinations of conditions unique to each place and historical moment, a word uttered at any given time and place will have a meaning different from its meaning at any other time and place. Thus we all live in a dialogic world where meanings constantly intersect and modify one another, and this consciousness of multiple voices is the precondition for language play and parody ('From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse'). ⁶²*Implications of Literacy*, p. 10.