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The Purpose of *Culhwch and Olwen*

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Even a casual reader of *Culhwch and Olwen* cannot fail to note a number of amusing passages of both high and low humour. This humorous element is not intended as relief or to keep the reader's attention, but is indeed part of the very *raison d'être* of this distinguished tale. While the jokes the author introduces in the text may be both high and low, his techniques are sophisticated, even brilliant. This has been only partly appreciated in the secondary literature.¹ Even more fundamental to *Culhwch and Olwen* is a celebration of logical ingenuity, which at the same time pokes fun at it. Yet, the tale is so wonderfully put together that the less curious are still treated to an engaging story. The more urbane reader is drawn in to the story, trying to catch the intentional mistakes planted by the author and unravel the logical conundrums. These characteristics are found throughout the various segments of the story. This most significant aspect of *Culhwch and Olwen* has received no mention by the commentators. I have referred to an author and I will give evidence that *Culhwch and Olwen* is indeed the work of a specific individual, rather than a redacted compilation. This will hardly come as a surprise to many, but no evidence for this position has been published. Heretofore *Culhwch and Olwen* has been considered of great antiquity and the oldest of the tales. I will question this view.

Humour and Wit

To begin pointing out humorous aspects in *Culhwch and Olwen*, note the scene where Goleuddydd realizes she is soon to die and that her husband will wish for a new wife. Moreover, she fears the new wife will seek to replace Culhwch with her own son. To avoid this she seeks her husband's promise that he will not remarry until a two-headed briar grows on her grave. Cilydd assents to this and the reader will notice that he does indeed keep his word. On her part, Goleuddydd instructs her tutor ('athro') to strip the vegetation around her grave every year. It is amusing that while the tutor's work requires only a yearly application, Cilydd is so anxious to remarry that he sends his man every morning to check the grave site. Finally, after seven years the tutor forgets his duty and a briar grows on the grave.

It is with a cool efficiency that a suitable wife for Cilydd is located. As she happens to be married at the time to King Doged, her husband is simply killed and his lands seized. Moreover, there is no indication that Doged's wife is particularly disturbed by this

¹ Joan Radner, 'Interpreting Irony in medieval Celtic narrative: the case of *Culhwch ac Olwen*', *CMCS*,

16 (Winter 1988), 41–59, pursued looking at the humorous aspects as a major component in the tale.

situation. How is this to be interpreted? Bromwich and Evans express a particular view and one with which I would disagree,

The story takes us back to an archaic world whose primitive manners lie beyond our sympathy and comprehension. Very little emotion or human response is in any way expressed, and there is a total absence of compassion. No apology or explanation is either given or expected for deeds of unprovoked violence: King Doged is killed and his wife forcefully adducted ... Such crude barbarities outdistance anything – even the atrocities of Efnisien – which is in the least comparable in the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*. There is a complete lack of moral perspective in *Culhwch*.²

Such a view can be challenged on both general and specific grounds. In general terms it assumes the untenable view that human cultures move from brutality to civility. Specifically, the culture of the Britons from Roman times on can in no way be regarded as 'primitive'. Within *Culhwch and Olwen* itself it is difficult to deny the many sensitive depictions of human nature. Arthur says to Culhwch, 'mae uyg kallon yn tirioni vrthyt mi a wn dy hanuot om gvaet', 'My heart grows warm towards you. I know you are from my blood'.³ Another example is found with the wife of Custennin who when told Culhwch had come seeking Olwen, 'deu synhwyr a oed genthi. llawen a oed genthi dyuot y nei uab y chwayr attei a thrist oed genthi. kany rywelsei eiroet y uynet ae eneit ganthaw a delhei y erchi y neges honno', 'She had two emotions. She was happy about the coming of her nephew, the son of her sister to her. And she was sad because she had never seen going, with his life with him, he who came to seek that purpose.' In particular, women are not mere objects for possession. As Goleuddydd mentions to her husband, 'a recdouyd ynt y gwraged weithon',⁴ 'and the wives are a dispenser of gifts nowadays'. Instead of attributing the almost incidental killing of Doged and his wife's detachment to a primitive culture, we have instead the author's often utilized device of absurdity. This same technique is seen in Arthur's offer to Culhwch:

Kyn ny thriccych ti yma unben ti a geffy kyuarws a notto dy benn ath tauawd. hyt y sych gwynt. hyt y m gwlych glaw. hyt yr etil heul. hyt yd ymgyffret mor. hyt yd ydiw dayar. eithyr uy llong. am llen. a chaletuwch uyg cledyf. a ron gom yant uyg gwayw. ac vyneb gwrthucher uy yscwy. a charnwenhan uyg kyllell. a gwenhvyuar uyg gwreic.⁵

Though you do not live here, chieftain, you shall have a gift which your head and your tongue specify. As far as wind dries, as far as rain wets, as far as the sun reaches, as far as the sea extends, as far as earth exists, except for my boat and my mantle, and Caledfwlch my sword, and Rhongomyniad my lance, and Wynebgwrthucher my shield, and Carnwennan my knife, and Gwenhwyfar my wife.

The humour in both instances results from the relative lack of importance of the wife for the husband or the husband for the wife.

This certainly runs counter to the accepted norm of the prose tales where affection is expected and lack of such is derided. There are myriad examples of which I give a sampling. In *Pwyll* we have the intimacy between Arawn of Annwn and his wife and the

² Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, *Culhwch and Olwen* (Cardiff, 1992), pp. lxxvii–lxxviii.

³ WM, 460. 6–8.

⁴ WM, 452. 31–2.

⁵ WM, 459. 25–37.

closeness of Teyrnnon Twryf Liant and his wife. In *Branwen* we see the cooperation between Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid and Cymidei Cymeinfoll. In contrast we see that Matholwch's mistreatment of his wife Branwen resulted in his condemnation and the destruction of Ireland. The *Third Branch* offers us the close friendship between Pryderi and Cigfa and between Manawydan and Rhiannon. Note also Llwyd mab Cil Coed's thrice repeated efforts to save his wife from being hung. In *Math* the infidelity of Blodeuedd and her treachery is treated in the harshest terms. The main theme of *Breudwyt Maxen Wledic* is the love and concern of Maccen for Elen. The Lady of the Fountain, though pragmatic, is devoted to her husband. Also in *Chwedyl Iarlles y Ffynfawn*, Owein is upbraided for essentially abandoning his wife. In *Peredur*, the Proud One of the Clearing comes to grief for not trusting his wife. Peredur's foster sister bemoans the murder of her husband. *Gereint* presents a number of examples, foremost of which is the relationship between Gereint and Enid. The Knight of the Sparrowhawk, Edern mab Nudd, and his wife seem to have a solid relationship, as do the elderly deposed earl and his wife. Finally, in *Culhwch and Olwen* itself, the marriage of Custennin and his wife is clearly loving even after the loss of twenty-three sons, as is seen in the banter between them.

Another example of the use of the absurd is the double-talk found in the speech of the old hag to Cilydd's second wife. As far as I am aware this is the sole example of double-talk in all of Welsh medieval literature, with the exception of *Chwedleu Seith Doethon Rufein*. The relationship of this text to *Culhwch and Olwen* will be discussed near the end of this article.

Dytgweith yd aeth y wreic da allan y orymdeith y deuth y dy henwrach a oed yny dref heb dant yny fenn. Amkawd y urenhines. ha wrach a dywedy di imi y peth a ouynnaf it yr dyw. kwt ynt plant y gwr am rydyallas yg gordwy. Amkawd y wrach nyd oes plant itaw. Amkawd y urenhines gwae uinheu uyn dyuot ar anuab. Dywawt y wrach. Nyt reit iti hynny. Darogan yw itaw kaffel ettiuet o honot ti yt gaffo ef kanys rygaffo o arall. Na wna tristit heuyt un mab yssyd itaw.⁶

One day as the good woman went out to walk about, she came to the house of an old woman without a tooth in her head, which was in the town. 'Ha, woman tell me the thing I ask you for God sake. Where are the children of the man who carried me off violently?'. Said the old woman. 'He does not have children'. Said the queen, 'Woe is me – my coming to one without a son'. Said the old woman, 'There is no need of that for you. There is a prophecy that he will have offspring. From you he will get them because he has not gotten (them) from another. Do not take on sadness either, he has one son.'

The old woman's contradictory statements are designed to present a logical puzzle which the attentive reader is implicitly invited to mull over.

More subtle is the motivation of the new queen's interest in Cilydd's children or lack thereof. It seems the queen's concern has not to do with her desire to have children by Cilydd, since we hear nothing more about this and her interest is centred about Culhwch. Perhaps the queen is worried that Culhwch would be the primary heir over any son she might have. However, the queen returns from her chat with the old woman happy (*yn llawen*⁷), which tends to argue against this. On the other hand, her proposal to marry off

⁶ WM, 453. 24–454. 2.

⁷ WM, 454. 3.

her daughter to her stepson is both shocking and brilliant. This would assure that the queen's daughter would be married well and that a grandson would be a dynast. Nevertheless, her daughter is of the highest pedigree – remember this is important to Cilydd – and she could achieve the same result by marrying her off to any suitable husband. Questions and analyses of this nature would certainly enter the mind of a medieval reader of this tale and would have been intended by the author.

The next comical elements in the tale are found in Culhwch's high-flown and pompous tone in his conversation with Glewlwyd, followed by Glewlwyd's even more bombastic address to Arthur. In both cases, the author draws attention to the exaggerated verbosity by deflating it with a short undercutting response.

Amkawd glewlwty gauaeluawr. Py diaspettych ti bynhac am gyfreitheu llys arthur nyth atter ti y mywn hyny elwyf ui y dywedud y arthur gesseuin.⁸

Said Glewlwyd Mighty-grasp, 'Whatsoever you may shout about the customs of Arthur's court, you will not be allowed in until I go to speak to Arthur first.'

Amkawd arthur. or bu ar dy gam y dyuost y mywn; dos ar dy redec allan⁹

Said Arthur, 'If you were walking when you came in, go out running.'

Other amusements or logical problems are to be found in Culhwch's time at Arthur's court. Glewlwyd informs Culhwch that at the present moment, 'Namyn mab brenhin gvlath teithiawc ... ny atter y mywn', 'Except a son of a rightful king of a country ... one is not allowed in'.¹⁰ It is puzzling that Culhwch does not immediately invoke this privilege, especially since this is exactly how he introduces himself to Arthur, 'kulhwch mab kilyd mab kyledon wledic. o oleudyt merch anlwd wledic uy mam', 'Culhwch son of Cilydd son of Cyleddon Wledig, from Goleuddydd daughter of Anlwd Wledig, my mother'.¹¹ Perhaps, the most intriguing logical problem introduced by the author in the early part of the tale is the complete ignorance of Arthur and his entire court as to the whereabouts of Olwen, let alone her very existence,

Nodaf arnat kaffel im olwen merch yspadaden penkawr ... Arthur a dywawd ha unben ny rygiglef. i. eir moet y uorwyn a dyweddy di nae rieni. Mi a ellynghaf genhadeu oe cheissaw yn llawen ... Dywawd kei ha unben ... Dygyrch ti genhym ni hyd pan dywettych ti nat oes hi yny byt. neu ninheu ae caffom¹²

I assign you to get Olwen daughter of Ysbaddaden Chief Giant for me ... Arthur said, 'Ha chieftain, I have never heard of the maiden which you mention nor her parents'.¹³ I will send messengers to find her gladly' ... Said Cei, 'Ha chieftain, ... Come with us until you shall say, "She does not exist in the world" or we shall get her'.

Surely, this is intended to poke fun at Arthur and his warriors for their self-importance and perhaps their ineffectuality. It turns out that the wife of Custennin is the sister of Goleuddydd. Since Ysbaddaden has murdered twenty-three of Custennin's sons and Olwen herself is a friend of Custennin's wife, it is difficult to accept that Arthur and his

⁸ WM, 457. 16–20.

⁹ WM, 458. 10–12.

¹⁰ WM, 456. 17–19.

¹¹ WM, 460. 9–11.

¹² WM, 460. 17–19 and 470. 17–35.

¹³ Arthur claims not to know of Olwen's parents ('rieni'), but Culhwch has only identified Olwen's father, not her mother.

genealogy-obsessed society does not know of the unfortunate circumstances of this distinguished family. Moreover, Ysbaddaden is, after all, Chief Giant: how can one not know about him? Cilydd's second wife certainly does. Custennin is appalled that Cei and his fellows do not know whose enormous fortress they are approaching, 'pieu y gaer. Dros y byt y gwys pan yw caer yspadaden penkawr bieu y gaer',¹⁴ 'Who owns the fortress? Across the world it is known that it is the fortress of Ysbaddaden Chief Giant. He owns the fortress.' Is it not a little curious that even after a year of searching Arthur's messengers find nothing? It is Cei, not Arthur, who initiates the successful search for Olwen. One could not fault an analytical reader for wondering if Arthur does indeed know of Ysbaddaden but would rather not tangle with him. This is certainly the view of Ysbaddaden himself. In one of the tasks he warns Culhwch that Arthur's help must be obtained to hunt Twrch Trwyth, but that cannot be obtained, 'Sef yw yr achaws. dan uy llaw i y mae ef',¹⁵ 'Now the reason is – he is under my control'.¹⁶

The author of *Culhwch and Olwen* goes to some pains to emphasize that certain persons are giants rather than men. The difference is not subtle. For example, as Cei and associates approach the fortress of Wrnach the Giant, 'Nachaf gwr du mwy no thrywyr y byt hwnn a welant yn dyuot or gaer',¹⁷ 'Behold, they saw a black man bigger than three men of this world coming from the fortress'. Custennin's wife is a giant, as is amusingly related by Cei,

Redec o heni yn eu herbyn o lywenyd. goglyt a oruc kei ym prenn or gludweir. Ae dyuot hitheu yn eu herbyn y geissaw mynet dwylaw mynwyl udunt gossot o gei eiras kyfrwg y dwy law. Gwascu o honei hitheu yr eiras hyt pan yttod yn vden diednedic. Amkawd kei ha wreic pei mi rywascut uelly ny oruydei ar arall uyth rodi serch im drwc a serch hwnnw.¹⁸

She ran to meet them joyfully. Cei grabbed at a log from the wood-pile. And she came to meet them to try to embrace them. Cei put a post between her two hands. She crushed the post until it was a coiled(?) rope. Said Cei, 'Ha woman, If it had been me you had crushed thus, not would another ever have to give love to me. A sorry love that.'

Custennin himself is also a giant, for when Culhwch gives him a ring, 'Keissaw gwiscaw y uodrwy o honaw ac nyd ai idaw. Ay dodi a oruc ynteu y mys y uanec',¹⁹ 'He sought to put on his ring, but it did not go on him and he put it on the finger of his glove'. A man's ring is too small to fit on Custennin's finger and he is forced to put it on the soft flexible glove finger. Note also the enormous size of Custennin's dog, 'A gauaelgi kydenawc ach y law. noc amws naw gayaf oed mwy',²⁰ 'And a shaggy mastiff beside him – larger it was than a

¹⁴ WM, 473. 8–10. The wording in the Red Book (*JCI11*, 822. 21–24 = *RM*, 115) is slightly different and more mocking, 'bieu y gaer racko. meredic a wyr ywch dros y byt y gwys pan yw caer yspadaden penkawr yw', 'Who owns the fortress there? You are ignorant men. Across the world it is known that it is the fortress of Ysbaddaden Chief Giant – it is'.

¹⁵ WM, 485. 7–8.

¹⁶ This phrasing is unique to the White Book and the Red Book reads (*JCI11*, 830. 12–13 = *RM* 125. 7–8) 'ny elly ditheu dreis arnaw ef', 'You are not able to apply force against him'. This is a common phrase

in the task list. Even one who thinks the White Book includes a later wording must admit that someone no later than the mid-fourteenth century interprets the story as I have suggested above. Note that the White Book reading is not a scholarly comment, but is articulated in the first person and intended as part of the tale.

¹⁷ WM, 486. 8–10.

¹⁸ WM, 474. 20–33.

¹⁹ WM, 473. 25–28.

²⁰ WM, 472. 21–22.

stallion of nine winters'. The Red Book has Custennin referring to, 'vym brawt yspadaden penn kawr',²¹ 'my brother Ysbaddaden Chief Giant'.²²

The point of these observations is that giants are sometimes among the elite of the society of men. If Goleuddydd daughter of Anlawdd Wledig was a member of the highest rank so must be her sister, the giant, Custennin's wife also.²³ Custennin likewise, would then be a member of the upper class since we would hardly expect her to marry below herself. How can Arthur be unaware of what goes on at the highest levels of British society? Again, it seems plausible that *Culhwch and Olwen* does not take Arthur's declared ignorance seriously.²⁴

More overt displays of humour are the depictions of heroes acting less than bravely. After Cei spies Custennin's fearsome dog,

Amkawd kei gwrhwr gwalstawd ieithoed. Dos y gyfrwch ar dyn racco. Kei nyt edeweis uynet namyn hyd yd elhut titheu. down y gyt yno. amkawd menw mab teirgwaed. na uid amgeled genhwch mynet yno. Mi a yrraf lledrith ar y ki hyd na wnel argywed y neb.²⁵

Said Cei, 'Gwrhwr, Interpreter of Languages, Go to speak with the man there.' 'Cei, I agreed to go only as far as you would go.' 'We will go there together.' Said Menw mab Teirgwaedd, 'Do not be anxious to go there. I will put a spell on the dog so that he shall not do harm to anyone.'

After Cei and Bedwyr happen to see Dillus the Bearded and pluck his beard, not through might, but by cunning, they are mocked in this by Arthur.

ac yna y kanei arthur yr eglyn hwnn. Kynnllyuan a oruc kei. o uaryf dillus uab eurei. Pei Jach dy angheu uydei.²⁶

And then Arthur sang this englyn: Cei made a leash from the beard of Dillus mab Eurei. If he were alive, your death he would be.

This criticism is not unjustified if one remembers that Cei also used trickery to obtain the sword of Wnach the Giant. It is not unlikely that the author had in mind 'kynnllywyr', 'treachery, trick' as a pun on 'kynnllyuan', 'leash'. For all this, Cei's anger at Arthur would be completely justifiable to a medieval reader of *Culhwch and Olwen*. None is more solicitous of Arthur's honour than Cei. It is Cei who recommends that the laws of Arthur's court not be broken to accommodate Culhwch.²⁷ It is Cei who chides Culhwch for disparaging Arthur, and who takes it upon himself to find Olwen²⁸ and does so success-

²¹ *JC111*, 822. 26-27 = *RM*, 115. 22.

²² *CO*, p. liv lists the giants appearing in *Culhwch and Olwen*, but strangely does not include Custennin or his wife. Dillus Farfawg is not described as a giant in this or any other medieval text. I presume Bromwich and Evans regard him as such based on Cei digging a pit under Dillus's feet, 'mwyhaf yny byt', 'the biggest in the world' (*JC111*, 837c. 4 = *WM*, 495. 19 = *RM*, 133. 19).

²³ *WM*, 474. 12-13.

²⁴ In the Second Branch of the Mabinogi, Bendigeidfran, the king of the entire island of Britain, is a giant. Certain rules of giant genetics are in play. A giant must have at least one parent who is a giant. I

know of no examples otherwise. However, men and giants can find each other sexually appealing. Peredur and the daughter of the ruler of the Round Valley - she is clearly identified as a giant - are attracted to one another (*WM*, 146. 31-147. 21). The children of giants may be men. There is no reason to think Olwen is a giant, nor is Goreu, and outside of *Culhwch and Olwen*, Bendigeidfran's brother Manawydan and sister Branwen do not seem to be giants.

²⁵ *WM*, 472. 30-9.

²⁶ *JC111*, 837c. 11-14 = *WM*, 495. 28-31 = *RM*, 133. 25-7.

²⁷ *WM*, 458. 21-5.

²⁸ *WM*, 470. 31-5.

fully. It is Cei who places himself in danger confronting the dangerous giants Ysbaddaden and Wnach. This was arduous, taking a year of effort.²⁹ It was Cei who found Mabon mab Modron and he was the actual rescuer, carrying Mabon mab Modron on his own back while still fighting.³⁰ Finally, it is Cei who performs the difficult and dangerous task of plucking out the beard of Dillus while he is still alive. Little wonder Cei is indignant at Arthur's slight. Why would Arthur do this? Again a reasonable motivation is that Arthur is angry at Cei for forcing him into the situation of having to carry out the promise of obtaining Olwen for Culhwch. In this regard, it is interesting to note that no character in the story besides Arthur refers to the tasks as 'annoethu', 'difficulties'.³¹ This may be contrasted with the statement by Culhwch's father Cilydd, that it will be easy, 'hawd', to obtain Olwen by going to Arthur.³² The term 'hawd' is also used by Culhwch in evaluating all but the last condition set forth by Ysbaddaden before he can marry Olwen.³³

A humorous ridiculing of Arthur's warriors, not for lack of bravery, but for lack of fighting prowess is seen in:

A chynghori o wynn uab nud. a gwythyr uab greidawl gellwng kacmwri. a hygydd y urawt. y ymlad ar wrach. ac ual y deuthant y mywn yr ogof y hachub a oruc y wrach. Ac ymauel yn hygydd herwyd gwallt y benn. ae daraw yr llawr deni. Ac ymauel o gacmwri yndi hitheu. herwyd gwallt y phenn. ae thynnu yar hygydd yr llawr. ac ymchoelut a oruc hitheu ar kacmwri. ac eu dygaboli yll deu. ac eu diaru. ae gyrru allan dan euhub ac eu hob . . . gellwng hir amren a hir eidyl yr ogof. a mynet a orugant. Ac or bu drwc traferth y deu gynt. gwaeth uu drafferth y deu hynny. hyt nas gwypei duw y vn o honunt ell pedwar allu mynet or lle. namyn mal y dodet ell pedwar. ar lamrei kessec arthur.³⁴

And Gwyn mab Nudd and Gwythyr mab Greidawl advised that Cacamwri and his brother Hygydd be sent to fight with the hag. And as they went into the cave the hag attacked and seized Hygydd by the hair of his head and he was struck down beneath her. And Cacamwri grabbed her by the hair of her head and pulled her down from upon Hygydd. But she turned over onto Cacamwri and soundly beat them both and

²⁹ *WM*, 488. 37-8, *JC111*, 832. 2-4 = *RM*, 128. 10-11.

³⁰ *JC111*, 837. 8-10 = *WM*, 493. 18-21 = *RM*, 131. 29-132. 1.

³¹ *JC111*, 833. 8 = *WM*, 489. 6 = *RM*, 128. 15, *JC111*, 837. 14 = *WM*, 493. 25 = *RM*, 132. 4, *JC111*, 837c. 21 = *WM*, 496. 2 = *RM*, 134. 3, *JC111*, 843. 16 = *WM*, 505. 25 = *RM*, 141. 24. The term is used only two other times. At the end of the tale (*WM*, 506. 30-1 = *RM*, 142. 22, only the Red Book version is still extant for this passage) it is used by the narrator. At the end of specifying the tasks Ysbaddaden says to Culhwch, in the Red Book version, 'a phan geffych hynny oll or anoethu. vy merch inneu a geff y uau it', 'and when you get all that of the anoethu, my daughter you will obtain as a possession for you.' (*JC111*, 830. 40-2 = *RM*, 125. 29-30). Comparing this with the White Book version, 'a ffan gaffer hynny ym merch inneu a geff', 'and when that is gotten my daughter you shall obtain.' (*WM*, 486. 3-4), I am inclined to view the Red Book version as a scribal elaboration and the occurrence of 'anoethu' here as

not original. The phrases 'hynny oll or anoethu' and 'yn uau it' of the Red Book make for belaboured Welsh and are unnecessary. Moreover, comparing the previous sentence in the two versions we also find a difference in wording. The White Book reads 'ny oruyd arnat na bwyt na dillat y merch i. Keis hynny', 'neither food nor clothing for my daughter, it is not required of you. Seek those (the tasks)' (*WM*, 486. 1-3). The equivalent lines in the Red Book are 'ny oruyd arnat na bwyt na dillat ym merch i tra geissych hynny', 'neither food nor clothing for my daughter, it is not required of you while you seek those (the tasks)'. (*JC111*, 830. 38-40 = *RM*, 125. 28-29). I suspect the Red Book scribe could not understand why Culhwch should have been responsible for Olwen's food and clothing and so tried to make sense of what was transpiring by introducing 'tra', 'while'.

³² *WM*, 454. 29.

³³ *WM*, 480. 16 ff.

³⁴ *JC111*, 843. 21-40 = *WM*, 505. 31-506. 20 = *RM*, 141. 28-142. 15.

disarmed them. And she drove (them) out wailing and hollering ... 'Send Tall Amren and Tall Eiddil to the cave', and they went. And if there had been grievous trouble to the previous two, more grievous was the trouble for those two, so that God knows there was not one among the four who was able to go from there, and accordingly all four were put on Llamrei, Arthur's mare.³⁵

Other fine examples of amusing writing are found in Ysbaddaden's wildly understated reactions to the horrendous injuries he receives through the agency of his own poisoned spears.

Ae aruoll a oruc bedwyr. Ae odif ynteu. a gwan yspadaden penkawr trwy aual y garr yn gythrymhet. amkawd ynteu. Emendigeit anwar daw. hanbyd gwaeth yd ymdaaf gan anwaeret. Mal dala cleheren ym tostes yr hayarn gwenwynic. Poet emendigeit y gof ay digones. ar einon y digonet arnei mor dost yw ... ae aruoll a oruc Menw mab teirgverth. ae odif ynteu ae wan yn alauon dwy uronn. Hyn pan dardawd yr mein gefyn allan. Emendigeit anwar daw mal dala gel bendoll ym tostes yr hayarn dur. Poet emendigeit y foc yt uerwit yndi pan elwyf yn erbyn allt hatuyd ygder dwy uron arnaf a chyllagwst. a mynych lysuwyd ... ae aruoll a oruc kulhwch. ae odif yn mal y rybuchi. ae wan ynteu yn aual y lygat hyt pan aeth yr gwegil allan. Emendigeit anwar daw hyt tra ym gatter yn uyw hanbyd gwaeth drem uy llygeit pan elwyf yn erbyn gwynt berw a wnant. atuyd gal penn a ffendro arnaw ar ulaen pob lloer. poet emendigeit foc yt uerwid yndi. mal dala ki kyndeiravc yw genhyf mal ym gwant yr hayarn gwenwynic.³⁶

And Bedwyr caught it and he threw it back. And Ysbaddaden Chief Giant was struck right through the kneecap. He said, 'Cursed cruel son-in-law, it will be worse when I travel along a slope. Like a sting of a horsefly to me, the poisoned iron is painful. Cursed be the smith who made it and the anvil it was made on, so painful it is ... And Menw mab Teirgwaedd caught it and he threw it back. And it struck in the middle of his two breasts with the result that it emerged out the small of the back. 'Cursed cruel son-in-law. Like a bite of a hole-headed leech to me, the hard iron is painful. Cursed be the forge which it was heated in. When I come against a hill a constriction of the two breasts will befall me and a stomach ache and frequent nausea.' ... And Culhwch caught it and he threw it back in accordance as he desired. And it struck him in his eyeball so that it went out through the nape of the neck. 'Cursed cruel son-in-law. While I remain alive, worse will be the sight of my eyes. When I go into a wind they will water and a faint will be on me (lit. on him) at every new moon. Cursed be the forge which it was heated in. Like a bite of an angry dog is to me, likewise to me is the stab of the poisoned iron.'

As pervasive as humour is in *Culhwch and Olwen*, it is rare in the rest of the prose literature. In *Pwyll*, the 'Badger in the Bag' scene is one such example. Likewise, in *The Lady of the Fountain* where Cynon mab Clydno reports on his being mocked by the keeper of

³⁵ To Bromwich and D. Simon Evans the point is that a 'faricically excessive load' is placed on the horse's back (CO, p. 170 (n. 1224-5)). I believe this misses the author's intent. I take the intent to focus on the unceremonious manhandling of the four men by the Very Black Witch and their further humiliation by being loaded onto the horse like so much baggage. It is

within a sturdy horse's capacity to carry four men, at least for a short distance. Remember also this is no ordinary horse, but Arthur's mare Llamrei. Note that in Triad 44 horses are named who carry as many as seven and a half people over a considerable distance (TYP2, 109-10).

³⁶ WM, 477. 24-479. 15.

the forest after his fiasco at the magic fountain. Perhaps also, when Rhonabwy and his companions are trying to flee Iddawg in *Breudwyt Ronabwy*.³⁷ Humour is then one of the defining characteristics of *Culhwch and Olwen*.

Logical Ingenuity

While earlier commentators noted various amusing passages in *Culhwch and Olwen*, though without highlighting humour as a critical element in this tale, there is another element which as far as I can tell has never been discussed. I refer to the use of ingenious logic on the part of the author. Coupled with this are the incongruities and errors found throughout the story. I contend that these mistakes are intentional and designed to engage the perceptive reader in looking out for these inconsistencies. That these errors were recognized by medieval readers is shown by the killing of Ysgithyrwyn Chief Boar where Arthur's dog Cafall plays a major role. The manuscript states, 'Nyt y kwn a nottayssei yspaden ar gwlhwch a ladawd y baed. namyn kauall ki arthur ehun',³⁸ 'They were not the dogs which Ysbaddaden had specified to Culhwch which killed the boar, but Cafall, the dog of Arthur himself.'³⁹

Just as humour is rarely seen in the other tales, so the same may be said about the use of ingenuity. Thus the strategies employed in overcoming various situations in the other tales are quite direct and obvious. Perhaps, the only scheme one could at least label clever is seen in Rhiannon's use of the magic bag against Gwawl in the *First Branch*. Gwydion's endless tricks in the *Fourth Branch* display a good understanding of psychology but are not unexpected. The conditions necessary to kill Lleu Llaw Gyffes are complex but arbitrary and without logical underpinning. In *Lludd and Llefelys*, the brothers' attempt to speak without being overheard by the Coranieid is not notably original.

The 'Oldest Animals'

In *Culhwch and Olwen*, on the other hand, the author's love of the clever and the ingenious is seen throughout. Goleuddydd's clever use of a briar on her grave to keep Culhwch from being dispossessed and the logically challenging double-talk of the old woman have already been mentioned. Consider the 'greeting' offered to Cei and his companions by Custennin, 'Ny bo berthach byth y boch chwi no minheu',⁴⁰ 'May you be never better than me'. Given Custennin's circumstances, this is a curse more than a greeting. The means by which the oldest animals describe their ages are certainly ingenious. The Blackbird of Cilgwri says:

³⁷ There are a few other incidents which some may consider to at least have a humorous element, such as Manawydan toying with Llwyd mab Cil Coed over the fate of the mouse, or the scene where Luned accuses the Lady of the Fountain of being impractical. Bromwich claims a humorous element in some of the Triads (TYP2, pp. cxvi ff.). I do not personally find any humour in these triads.

³⁸ JC111, 837d. 31-3 = RM, 135. 8-10. Note that CO, 1020, incorrectly reads *kwnn* instead of *kwn*.

³⁹ The tale in our manuscripts has no mention of Ysbaddaden requiring dogs in the hunt for Ysgithyrwyn. Even if this comment were made on the basis of a different version, the point is that the medieval scribes were sensitive to inconsistencies.

⁴⁰ WM, 473. 3-4.

pan deuthum i yma gyntaf. eington gof a oed yma. a minneu ederyn ieuanc oedwn. ny wnaethpwynt gweith arnei. namyn tra uu uyg geluin arnei bob ucher. Hediw nyt oes kymmeint kneuen o honei heb dreulaw.⁴¹

When I first came here a smith's anvil was here and I was a young bird. No work was done on it except while my beak was on it every evening. Today there is not so much as a nut of it not worn away.

The Blackbird of Cilgwri knows of an even older creature, the Stag of Rhedynfre. The Stag describes its age as follows:

pan deuthum i yma gyntaf. nyt oed namyn vn reit o bop tu ym penn. ac nyt oed yma goet namyn un o gollen derwen. ac y tyfwys honno yn dar can keing. ac y dygwydwy y dar gwedy hynny. a hediw nyt oes namyn wystyn coch o honei. Yr hynny hyt hediw yd wyf i yma.⁴²

When I first came here there was not but one point on either side of my head and there were not trees here but one oak sapling. And that grew into an oak of a hundred branches and the oak fell after that. And today there is not but a red stump from it. From then until today I have been here.

The Stag of Rhedynfre refers Arthur's messengers to the even older Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd who paints its great age in the following beautiful way:

Pan deuthum i yma gyntaf. y cwm mawr a welwch glynn coet oed. ac y deuth kenedlaeth o dynyon idaw. ac y diuawyt. ac y tyuwys yr eil coet yndaw. ar trydyd coet yw hwnn. a minneu neut ydydynt (corrected by the scribe to ydynt) yn gynyon boneu vy esgyll.⁴³

When I first came here the great valley which you see was a wooded glen. And a race of men came to it and it was laid waste. And a second wood grew in it and this is the third wood. And as for me now, the stems of my wings are stumps.

Next the messengers of Arthur are taken to 'y mae yr anniueil hynaf yssyd yn y byt hwnn. a mwyaf a dreigyl. eryr gwern abwy',⁴⁴ 'The oldest animal who is in this world and roams most – the Eagle of Gwernabwy'. The Eagle describes its age as follows:

Mi a deuthum yma yr yspell o amser. a phann deuthum yma gyntaf. Maen a oed ym. ac y ar y benn ef y pigwn y syr bop ucher. weithon nyt oes dyrnued yn y uchet.⁴⁵

I came here in the far distance of time. And when I first came here I had a boulder and at its top I pecked at the stars every evening. Now it is not a handbreadth in its height.

Having gone through four animals, each older than the next, and finally reaching the oldest animal who also happens to be the one who roams furthest, one might think we have reached the end of the line. However, the story now takes an odd turn. The Eagle

⁴¹ *JCI* 11, 834. 7–13 = *WM*, 490. 8–14 = *RM*, 129. 11–15.

⁴² *JCI* 11, 834. 26–33 = *WM*, 490. 29–37 = *RM*, 129. 24. 29.

⁴³ *JCI* 11, 835. 7–13 = *WM*, 491. 10–16 = *RM*, 130. 6–10.

⁴⁴ *JCI* 11, 835. 16–18 = *WM*, 491. 20–23 = *RM*, 130. 13–14.

⁴⁵ *JCI* 11, 835. 22–6 = *WM*, 491. 27–32 = *RM*, 130. 17–20.

takes Arthur's messengers to the Salmon of Llyn Llyw. Though Salmon's enormous size is implied, no other special characteristics are assigned to him. It is true that in Celtic Britain and Ireland the salmon was regarded as a creature of wisdom, but in this case the Salmon does not even know the whereabouts of Mabon. He only knows that, at the wall of Caer Loyw, 'yno y keueis i. ny cheueis eirmoet o drwc y gymeint', 'there I found the like which I never found of misery'.⁴⁶ A trip to Caer Loyw is needed to establish that Mabon is indeed there. The Salmon episode is thus a bit jarring. Nonetheless, the inclination to see in this an example of accretion is suspect. I believe most redactors would have been inclined to give a consistent format to all five animals and also to tell us why the Salmon is given the final place in the series. I am inclined to see the entire 'Oldest Animals' segment as an organic whole created by the author of *Culhwch and Olwen*. Perhaps the dissonant appearance of the Salmon was intended to catch the attention of sensitive readers. I give examples of this technique below.

The love of logical ingenuity is the dominant feature of the task list. Of the forty or so tasks, only two are physically impossible. The first task requires among other things the sowing and reaping of seed all within the period of a day.⁴⁷ The eighth task is also physically impossible, requiring 'mel kynteit heb wchi heb wenyn',⁴⁸ 'honey of a first swarm, without drones, without bees'. Most of the other tasks are seemingly impossible, not due to physical limitations, but to logical considerations. With slight variations, Ysbaddaden notes of various individuals needed to perform the tasks, 'ny daw ef oe uod genhyt ti ny elly ditheu treis arnaw ef',⁴⁹ 'he will not come with you of his own volition, nor will you be able to force him'. Notable also are the logical sequences of tasks, one not obtainable without the next. Thus the comb and scissors of the Twrch Trwyth is needed, so of necessity the Twrch Trwyth must be hunted since he will not relinquish them voluntarily. This requires the use of Drudwyn, pup of Greid mab Eri. But Drudwyn cannot be held without the leash of Cors Cant Ewin. The leash must be attached to the collar of Canhastyr Canllaw. This in turn depends on the chain of Cilydd Canhastyr. This logical dependency is six elements in length. Branching off the main sequence there is another sequence. Mabon mab Modron is needed as the only houndsman who can handle Drudwyn. To accomplish the task of houndsman, Mabon will need to ride Gwyn Mygdwn the horse of Gweddwn. Mabon, who was kidnapped when he was three days old and whose whereabouts are unknown, cannot be obtained without the aid of Eidoel mab Aer. So far as I am aware logical sequences of this nature are found nowhere else in Welsh literature.

The listing of the tasks also serves an additional purpose for the author. They are a vehicle for displaying his extensive erudition. Even if Rachel Bromwich's assertion that '*Culhwch ac Olwen* originated in an entirely different milieu from that in which the triads were evolved'⁵⁰ is correct, this does not mean the lore in *Culhwch and Olwen* is erroneous. Remember that references by the poets to characters in the *Mabonogi* often do not correspond to events in the tales.

⁴⁶ *JCI* 11, 836. 16–18 = *WM*, 492. 24–26 = *RM*, 131. 9–10.

⁴⁷ *WM*, 480. 6–8.

⁴⁸ *WM*, 481. 18–19.

⁴⁹ *WM*, 480. 14–16.

⁵⁰ *TYP*², p. xciii.

Sword of Wrnach

It is in the carrying out of the tasks that the author displays his skills to fullest effect. Consider the last of the tasks enumerated by Ysbaddaden, the acquisition of the sword of Wrnach the giant. This is actually the first of the tasks accomplished and done through the energy of Cei, even before Arthur knows that Olwen has been located. As said above, this hints at Arthur's reluctance to carry out his promise to find Olwen. Bromwich and D. Simon Evans suggest that Wrnach's sword is a later addition to the original task list.⁵¹ They argue that the sword is intended for the killing of Twrch Trwyth, though the earlier tasks only require his comb and scissors. Moreover, after Arthur is told of the tasks and presented with Wrnach's sword, he says, 'Pa beth yssyd iawnaŷ y geissaw gyntaf or annoethau hynny',⁵² 'Which will it be best to seek first of those difficulties'. Both arguments are weak. In the second argument Arthur is simply asking which of the remaining annoethau it will be best to seek first. Notice that, after rescuing Mabon mab Modron, Arthur uses a virtually synonymous phrase, 'beth Jawnhaf weithon y geissaw yn gyntaf or annoethau'.⁵³ 'What is best now to seek first of the difficulties'. As to the first argument, Bromwich and Evans make the unwarranted assumption that the 'intended purpose of the Sword was that it should be used to slay the Twrch Trwyth'.⁵⁴ Where is the evidence? The task is expressed by Ysbaddaden as 'Cledyf wrnach gawr ny ledir uyth namyn ac ef',⁵⁵ 'The sword of Wrnach the Giant, he can never be killed except with it'. The 'he' of the translation is Wrnach as would be standard Welsh syntax, not the grammatically remote Twrch Trwyth.⁵⁶ Since the sword of Wrnach is never mentioned again after Cei returns to the court of Arthur with the news about Olwen, we have therefore to look for a use for the sword – internal to the story – not connected to the Twrch Trwyth. Bromwich and Evans, seemingly forgetting that they believe the sword is needed to kill Twrch Trwyth, now say:

Surely this was the task for which the Sword of Wrnach was once intended, as the murder-weapon which duplicated the ysgithr or tusk of the giant Boar, which was destined to slay Ysbaddaden Chief Giant in an early version of *Culhwch ac Olwen*.⁵⁷

This also is difficult to support. It assumes the manuscript version incorporates very poorly integrated alternate forms of the same story, and takes it as given that the tusk of Ysgithrwyn was intended to kill Ysbaddaden – it was not. Ysbaddaden states that the tusk is 'a uynaf y eillaw ym',⁵⁸ 'what I need to shave myself'. Indeed, we may reasonably infer the tusk is used to shave Ysbaddaden, though in a brutal fashion, since the shaving is done by Cadw of Prydein, who was both the taker of the tusk and its caretaker. The tusk is presumably not used to slay Ysbaddaden, since this is by beheading and performed by Goreu mab Custennin not Cadw.⁵⁹

What then is the narrative function of the Wrnach episode? This is one of the longer sections of the tale so we are assured that it did serve some significant purpose. There are three scenes of court entrance in *Culhwch and Olwen*: Culhwch's entrance to Arthur's

court, the entrance of Cei and his companions to the court of Ysbaddaden Chief Giant (actually three entrances), and the entrance of Cei and his companions to the court of Wrnach Giant. The author is making it virtually impossible not to compare what happens when the same cast of characters enters the courts of the two giants. We may assume Arthur's court and its customs are the gold standard. Both giants live in fortresses almost identically described as 'mwyhaf ar keyryt y byt',⁶⁰ 'the greatest of fortresses in the world'. It is not possible to determine the protocols of Ysbaddaden's nine gatekeepers since Cei and his friends kill them all and rather easily. This was apparently not possible with Wrnach's gatekeeper since Cei conforms to his rules. While Arthur's court is generous to wayfarers to a fault, Wrnach's court is hostile. Cei's party is informed that, 'Ha vnben duw ach notho. ny dodyw neb guestei eiroet o heni ae uyw ganthaw',⁶¹ 'Ha chieftain, May God take note of you. No visitor has ever come from it and his life with him'. However, in all other respects the protocols at the court of Wrnach are identical to those of Arthur's court, as emphasized by the nearly identical wording of the conversations of Culhwch with Glewlwyd and Gwrhŷr with Wrnach's porter. Equally apparent are the dissimilarities between Ysbaddaden and Wrnach and likewise the members of their staffs. Ysbaddaden says of his staff, 'Mae uy gweisson drwc am direidyeit',⁶² 'Where are my sorry servants and my thugs?' In contrast, Wrnach's staff seems efficient and perceptive. Thus when Cei describes himself to the porter as, 'yslipanwr cledyueu goreu yny byt wyf ui',⁶³ 'The best furbisher of swords in the world am I', the porter reports to Wrnach the essential information and leaves out the embellishment or at least tones it down. He reports, 'ac vn o nadunt a dywawt gallel yslipanu cledyueu',⁶⁴ 'And one of them said he is able to furbish swords'. Similarly, when the rest of Cei's party is given admission to Wrnach's fortress, 'a dadleu mawr a uu ar y gwyr hynny allan'.⁶⁵ 'And there was a big argument amongst those men outside'. That is, Wrnach's servants are concerned about the danger of having allowed in Cei's companions.⁶⁶ This concern was warranted, as seen from the events immediately following.

Though Ysbaddaden was a master of lore, as seen from his tasks, he is more than gruff. He has a habit of throwing poison spears at people and I have already quoted his interesting cursing. He is probably physically debilitated as he requires someone to raise his eyelids which droop down over his eyes. On the other hand, Wrnach is courteous, even charming, as seen by his conversation.

Oed reit y mi wrth hwnnw. ys guers yd wyf yn keissaw a olchei vyg cledyf nys rygeueis. gat hwnnw y mywn cans oed gerd ganthaw . . . Dywawt wrnach ha wr ae gwir a dywedir arnat gallel yslipanu cledyueu. Mi ae digonaf . . . Pwy well genhyt arnaw ae guynseit ae grwmseit. yr hwnn a uo da genhyt ti malpei teu uei gwna arnaw. Glanhau a oruc

⁶⁰ WM, 472. 10–11 (fortress of Ysbaddaden in the White Book). The White Book describes Wrnach's fortress by 'uwyhaf ar keyryd y byt' (WM, 486. 7–8). In the Red Book the two descriptions are 'teckaf o geyryd y byt', 'handsomest of fortresses in the world' (JC111, 821. 39 = RM, 114. 24–5) for Ysbaddaden and 'mwyhaf or byt' for Wrnach (JC111, 830. 45 = RM, 126. 2).

⁶¹ WM, 486. 17–20.

⁶² WM, 477. 12–13.

⁶³ WM, 486. 33–4.

⁶⁴ WM, 487. 6–7, thus the White Book. The Red

Book reads, 'Ac un o nadunt a dywawt gwybot yslipanu cledyueu o honaw yn da', 'And one of them says they know how to furbish swords well' (JC111, 831. 28–9 = RM, 126. 26–7).

⁶⁵ WM, 488. 4–5.

⁶⁶ This interpretation is made explicit in the Red Book version which reads, 'Dadleu mawr a uu gan y gwyr a oed allan am dyuot bedwyr a chei y mywn', 'There was a great argument amongst the men who were outside about Bedwyr and Cei coming in.' (JC111, 832. 12–13 = RM, 127. 20–1).

⁵¹ CO, p. 1, liv–lv.

⁵² JC111, 833. 7–8 = WM, 489. 5–6 = RM, 128. 14–15.

⁵³ JC111, 837. 12–14 = WM, 493. 23–5 = RM, 132. 3–4.

⁵⁴ CO, p. liv.

⁵⁵ WM, 485. 27–9.

⁵⁶ GMW, §200.

⁵⁷ CO, p. lvi.

⁵⁸ WM, 482. 16.

⁵⁹ WM, 507. 4–8 = RM, 142. 29–143. 1.

hanher y lleill gyllell idaw. ae rodi yn y law a oruc. a reinc dy uod di hynny. Oed well genhyf noc yssyd ym gwlat bei oll yt uei val hynn. Dyhed a beth bot gwr kystal athi heb gedymdeith. ... Y cledyf a daruu y wrteith. ae rodi a oruc kei yn llaw wrnach kawr y malphei y edrych a ranghei y uod idaw y weith. Dywawt y kawr. da yw y gueith a ranc bod yw genhyf.⁶⁷

'I have need of him. For some time I have been seeking one who could burnish my sword, but I have not found him. Allow him in since he has a craft.' ... Said Wrnach, 'Ha man, is it true what is said about you being able to furbish swords?' 'I do it ... Which is better for you on it, white blade or dark blade?' 'That which is pleasing to you as if it were yours – make it.' He cleaned half of one edge for him and put it into his hand. Are you pleased by that?' 'I would be satisfied more than with what is in my domain, that all of it be like that. A shameful thing that a man like yourself is without a companion.' ... The sword was burnished and Cei put it into the hand of Wrnach Giant so as if to see that the work was satisfactory to him. Said the giant, 'The work is good and it is pleasing to me.'

Thus we see Wrnach is a powerful and intelligent man and he is served by capable and astute assistants. With these observations in mind, I see the most plausible explanation for the task of obtaining the sword of Wrnach to be that Wrnach is a rival to Ysbaddaden, and incidentally to Arthur as well, and Ysbaddaden needs the sword to protect himself against Wrnach. We have already seen that the only reason given for this task was that Wrnach can only be killed with his own sword. Favouring this interpretation is that when Cei finally returns to Arthur's court after a year's absence, it is the sword of Wrnach which is given top billing, not the discovery of Olwen.⁶⁸ The important event is the killing of Wrnach and the elimination of a serious rival. Bromwich and Evans's suggestion that a 'main purpose of the Wrnach Gawr episode appears to have been to present Goreu son of Custennin as a hero who is second only to Cei',⁶⁹ has no significant evidence upon which to rest.

Engaging the Reader through 'Errors'

Since Ysbaddaden enumerates forty tasks, but the author of *Culhwch and Olwen* chooses only to detail the resolution of only ten, it is reasonable to infer that the author uses these ten to express his favourite points and techniques. To uncover these points and also because it is misunderstood by Bromwich and Evans, it is productive to examine the task of the flax seed in detail.

A wely di y keibedic rud draw. gwelaf. pan gyuaruum gyseuin a mam y uorwyn honno yd hewyt y naw hestawr llinat yndaw na du na gwynn ny doeth o honaw etwa. ar messur hwnnw yssyd gennyf ettwa. hwnnw a uynnaf inheu y gaffel yn y tir newyd draw. *hyt pan vo ef a uo pennlliein guynn am penn vym merch ar dy neithawr.*⁷⁰

'Do you see the hoed brown (land) there?' 'I see.' When I first met the one who was the mother of that maiden, nine hestors of flax seed were sown in it. Neither black nor white has come from it yet and that measure I have still. I want that to be brought forth in the new land yonder so that when it is, it will be a white headdress for the head of my daughter at your marriage.'

My understanding of this is that when Ysbaddaden met Olwen's mother he had a measuring device by which he measured out nine hestors of flax seed and sowed this on a hoed plot – the first plot of land he points out to Culhwch. The seed never germinated and remains on the old plot. He wants each and every seed collected from the old plot and planted in a new plot. This is the second plot pointed out to Culhwch. How this is achieved is described as follows:

Ac ual ydoed gwythyr mab greidawl. dydgweith yn kerdet dros vynynd. y clywei leuein a gridua girat. a garscon oed eu clybot. achub a oruc ynteu parth ac yno. ac mal y deuth yno dispeilaw cledyf a wnaeth. a llad y twynpath wrth y dayar. ac ev diffryt uelly rac y tan. ac y dywedassant wynteu wrthaw. Dwc uendyth duw ar einym gennyt. ar hynn ny allo dyn vyth y waret. ni a down y waret itt. Hwyntwy wedy hynny a doethant ar naw hestawr llinat a nodes yspadaden pennkawr ar culhwch yn uessuredic oll heb dim yn eisseu o honunt eithyr un llinhedyn. ar morgrugyn cloff a doeth a hwnnw kynny y nos.⁷¹

And as Gwythyr mab Greidawl was one day going over a mountain he heard a shout and dreadful moaning. And a horrid thing it was to hear them. He rushed towards there. And as he came there he drew a sword and cut down the mound near to the ground and rescued them thus from the fire. And they said to him, 'Accept the blessing of God and ours upon you. And that which a man would not ever be able to recover, we will come to recover for you.' They themselves afterwards came with the nine hestors of flax seed which Ysbaddaden Chief Giant specified to Culhwch in full measure without anything missing from them except one flax seed. And the lame ant came with that before night.

Oddly, Bromwich and Evans misinterpret the task and fail to realize that the seed is to be replanted in a new plot. They are thus perplexed by the function of the lame ant and indeed wonder why the ants are needed at all.⁷²

The scene of saving the ants is a tongue-in-cheek farce, and I believe the author is poking fun at his story. Ants are quiet creatures not given to loud outbursts and fires in anthills are not common events. How fortuitous that Gwythyr mab Greidawl happened by at just the right moment and what a lucky break that the ants offer to show their gratitude by saying, 'And that which a man would not ever be able to recover, we will come to recover for you.' It is almost as if they had been waiting around to solve the task of the nine hestors of flax seed. To be sure this segment is not overlooked, the author describes it in a way that would certainly be noted by a medieval reader. Only in a few instances in all of Welsh prose are characters and key objects discussed before being formally introduced – these few cases usually when the text itself shows signs of being defective. Here, however, we have an unintroduced reference to 'y twynpath', 'the mound', and at this point there is no way of knowing this is an anthill. Those who cry out, are rescued, and

⁶⁷ WM, 487. 7–488. 25.

⁶⁸ JC111, 833. 3–4 = WM, 489. 2–3 = RM, 128. 11–12.

⁶⁹ CO, p. lvi.

⁷⁰ WM, 481. 4–16 (White Book). The version in the Red Book (JC111, 827. 13–21 = RM, 121. 17–24) is nearly identical.

⁷¹ JC111, 837. 31–837b. 11 = WM, 494. 6–24 = RM, 132. 17–28.

⁷² CO, p. xlix.

who express their gratitude and about whom we are informed they obtain the nine hestors, are identified only by pronouns: 'ev', 'wynteu', 'einym', 'ni' and 'hwyntwy'. Clarification comes only at the very end when the 'morgrugyn cloff', 'lame ant', is mentioned.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the ant sequence is the person involved – Gwythyr mab Greidawl. Since talking to ants is involved, we would have expected Gwrhryr Gwalstawd Ieithoed, 'Gwrhryr, Interpreter of Languages'. It is said that 'yr holl ieithoed a wydat', 'he knows all languages'.⁷³ Arthur sends Gwrhryr on the search for Mabon mab Modron, since 'a chyfyeth wyt ar rei or adar ar anniueileit', 'and you have a common language with some of the birds and animals'.⁷⁴ Indeed, it is Gwrhryr who speaks with the Blackbird of Cilgwrri and the Eagle of Gwernabwy. We can be certain that it is Gwrhryr who translates in the conversations with the Stag of Rhedynfre, the Owl of Cwm Cawlwyd, and the Salmon of Llyn Llyw. Moreover, it is Gwrhryr who is sent by Arthur to speak with Grugyn Silver-Bristle, one of Twrch Trwyth's pigs. There are two incidents which virtually assure us that it is only Gwrhryr who can converse with animals. When the Salmon of Llyn Llyw agrees to help find Mabon mab Modron, Cei and Gwrhryr go on the Salmon's shoulders. Once Mabon is found, the Salmon returns and Bedwyr sits on the Salmon's shoulder in place of Gwrhryr since translation services are presumably no longer required. Secondly, prior to Gwrhryr being sent to talk with the Twrch Trwyth and his pigs, Menw mab Teirgwaedd made a visit there to try and take the treasures by stealth. There is no report of any conversation during Menw's excursion.

It is my contention that the author of *Culhwch and Olwen* has purposely introduced a number of subtle 'errors' in his text to provide a sort of scavenger hunt for the more attuned members of his audience.⁷⁵ We have already seen one of these mistakes mentioned by a medieval reader. In the ants and the flax seed incident, the exchange of Gwythyr for Gwrhryr is another 'mistake'. There are many other easily overlooked inconsistencies. Some of these have already been noted in the literature, but without an explanation for their cause.⁷⁶ Consider Eidoel mab Aer whom Ysbaddaden claims is necessary to finding Mabon mab Modron 'kanys diuudyawc uyd yn y geissaw', 'since he is assiduous in seeking him'.⁷⁷ It is surprising that Eidoel has a reputation for seeking Mabon since he himself is also being held prisoner. When Arthur frees Eidoel it sounds as if Arthur needs to coax Eidoel to help in the search for Mabon. 'Eidoel itti y mae iawn mynet y geissaw dy geuynderw yw. gyt am gwyr i', 'Eidoel, it is proper for you to go to seek him with my men – he is your first cousin'.⁷⁸ In the actual finding and rescue of Mabon, Eidoel plays no mentioned part and is unnecessary. Another inconsistency is seen in the number of Twrch Trwyth's pigs. When Arthur returns to Ireland in force after

⁷³ WM, 471. 33–34, similarly WM, 469. 4–5 and JC111, 833. 31–2 = WM, 489. 33 = RM, 129. 2–3.

⁷⁴ JC111, 833. 32–3 = WM, 489. 33–5 = RM, 129. 3–4.

⁷⁵ A somewhat similar motivation is suggested in Roger Middleton, 'Chwedl Gereint ab Erbin', in R. Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman, B. F. Roberts (eds), *The Arthur of the Welsh* (Cardiff, 1991), 147–57, p. 151, where the identification of a town is delayed until after its description. Middleton says, 'Someone who knew the region would be able to guess the identity of the town in advance and derive satisfaction from being proved correct'.

⁷⁶ Among these are a leash made from the beard of Dillus. In the task list this is needed to hold the two pups of an unnamed dog, presumably the bitch of Rhymhi. When Cei and Bedwyr happen upon Dillus, they say the leash is to hold Drudwyn. Another task asks for the comb and scissors between the ears of Twrch Trwyth. However, later in the tale the 'razor' is added to the comb and scissors.

⁷⁷ WM, 484. 3–4.

⁷⁸ JC111, 833. 33–35 = WM, 489. 35–7 = RM, 129. 3–5.

having stolen the Cauldron of Diwrnach, we are informed that Twrch Trwyth is at Esgeir Oerfel 'ae seithlydyn moch gantaw', 'and his seven young pigs with him'.⁷⁹ It is here that Arthur engages the Twrch Trwyth for the first time, though, 'ny ladawd namyn un parchell oe uoch', 'not did he kill but one piglet of his pigs'.⁸⁰ At this point there would now only be six piglets with Twrch Trwyth. However, when Arthur sends Gwrhryr to talk with Twrch Trwyth he finds him in his lair 'ae seithlydyn moch', 'and his seven young pigs'.⁸¹ This inconsistency is maintained a bit later in the story after Twrch Trwyth has crossed over to Wales and is pursued by a large host. We read:

Ac yna y llas banw oe uoch ef. ac yna yd aethpwyt eneit dros eneit ac ef. ac y lladwy yna twrch llawin. ac yna y llas arall oe voch. gwys oed y enw. ac odynd yd aeth hyt yn dyffrynn amanw. ac yno y llas banw a bennwic. Nyt aeth odynd gantaw oe uoch yn vyw. namyn grugyn gwallt ereint. a llwydawc gouynnyat.⁸²

And then a piglet of his pigs was killed. They came against him life for life and Twrch Llawin was killed. And then another of his pigs was killed, Gwys was his name. And then he went as far as Dyffryn Amanw, and there Banw and Bennwig were killed. Not did there go from there alive with him of his pigs but Grugyn Silver-bristle and Llwydawc Gouynnyat.

Seven piglets are enumerated in this passage. Bromwich and Evans miss this since they fail to notice the slaying of the piglet in the first sentence of the quoted passage.⁸³

Another planted 'mistake' is seen in the capture of the two pups of the bitch Rhymhi. This is the fourth of the accomplished tasks. The task itself is not detailed in Ysbaddaden's list, but has surely been accidentally omitted when the scribe's eye skipped over the repeated phrase, 'hawd yw genhyf gaffel hynny kyd tybyckych na bo hawd. kyt keffych hynny yssyd ny cheffych' found at the end of one task and the beginning of the next.⁸⁴ Two other tasks depend on getting Rhymhi's pups, a leash made from the beard of Dillus and the services of Cenedyr the Wild to handle the pups. The author now throws a sly surprise, for when Arthur surrounds Rhymhi and her pups, 'ac eu datrithaw o duw y arthur yn eu rith e hunein', 'and God transformed them back for Arthur into their own shape'.⁸⁵ Now that the pups are no longer pups, they can no longer serve in that capacity and their leash and houndsman are also useless.

The passage where Ysbaddaden says Culhwch is not responsible for the food or clothing of his daughter has already been cited in footnote 31. This statement was surprising to the Red Book scribe, or a predecessor, as he felt it necessary to emend the text by way of explaining it, even though his attempt is a poor one. We find no customary practice of prospective husbands providing food or clothing for their intended bride. Such is not found in the lawbooks or in the tales or other texts. One can point to Rhiannon during her engagements to Pwyll and Gwawl where nothing of this sort occurs or to Gereint and Enid where Gwenhwyfer provides Enid's raiment. Unless one is willing

⁷⁹ JC111, 838. 30–31 = WM, 499. 25–6 = RM, 136. 29–30.

⁸⁰ JC111, 839. 4–5 = WM, 499. 35–6 = RM, 137. 6.

⁸¹ JC111, 839. 13–14 = WM, 500. 7 = RM, 137. 12.

⁸² JC111, 841. 23–31 = WM, 503. 2–11 = RM, 139. 20–6.

⁸³ CO, p. 157 (n. 1067). It should be noted that the second instance of 'banw' must be a proper name

since it occurs in the phrase 'banw a bennwic'. The first instance of 'banw' must then be the common noun 'piglet'.

⁸⁴ WM, 480. 8–11 and frequently. The loss of the task of obtaining the Birds of Rhiannon from the Red Book is accounted for in the same way.

⁸⁵ JC111, 837. 28–9 = WM, 494. 3–4 = RM, 132. 14–15.

to accept Ysbaddaden's statement as a *non sequitur*, I believe its most plausible reason is as a purposely introduced 'error' by the author. The contradiction is with three of the tasks. In the first task a field must be prepared and a crop raised 'hyt pa uo hwnnw a wnelit yn uwyd a llynn yth neithawrwy ti a merch', 'so that that be what is made into food and drink for your wedding guests and [my] daughter[s]'.⁸⁶ The task of the flax-seed is 'a uo pennlliein guynn am penn vym merch ar dy neithawr', 'it will be a white headdress for the head of my daughter at your marriage'.⁸⁷ The task of obtaining the honey is intended 'y vragodi y wled', 'to make braggert for the feast'.⁸⁸

The author's taste for logical dilemma is manifest in the hopeless situation of Ysbaddaden Chief Giant. Olwen reveals that she has pledged to get her father's approval before marrying, 'kanyt oes hoedyl itaw namyn hyny elwyf gan wr', 'since he will have life only while I do not go with a husband'.⁸⁹ On the other hand, Culhwch and his party threaten Ysbaddaden with 'ac onys rody dy agheu a geffy ymdanei', 'and if you do not give her, you shall get death on account of her'.⁹⁰ This is a true no-win situation and logical challenge.

The difference between how the tasks are stipulated and accepted and how they are actually carried out are another puzzle presented by the author to the reader. Ysbaddaden describes the need for the Basket of Gwyddneu Long-shank by 'Mi a uynnaf uwytta o honno y nos y kysco vy merch genhyt', 'I must eat from that the night my daughter sleeps with you'.⁹¹ Ysbaddaden needs various objects, 'Corn gwlgawt gododin y wallaw arnam y nos honno', 'the Horn of Gwlgawd Gododdin to pour for us that night',⁹² 'Telyn teirtu ym dadanu y nos honno', 'the Harp of Teirtu to entertain me that night',⁹³ 'adar rianhon ... ym didanu y nos honno', 'the Birds of Rhiannon ... to entertain me that night',⁹⁴ 'yskithyr yskithyrwyn penn beid a uynnaf y eillaw ym', 'I need the tusk of Ysgithyrwyn Chief Boar to shave myself',⁹⁵ 'Reit yw ym estynnu vym blew wrth eillaw ym. nyt estwg uyth ony cheffir guaet y widon or du', 'There is need for me to prepare my hair in order for me to shave. It will never soften unless the blood of the Very Black Witch be obtained'.⁹⁶ From these statements it is clear that Ysbaddaden means to primp himself for his daughter's wedding feast. Specifically, he uses 'eillaw' to mean simply 'shave (the beard)' and not as a euphemism for 'to kill'. Moreover, after shaving he intends to eat and be entertained at Olwen's marriage feast. Remember that Ysbaddaden stipulates 'pan gaffwyf inheu a nottwyf arnat ti titheu a geffy uy merch',⁹⁷ 'when I get what I specify to you, you shall get my daughter'.

The author plays some final surprises on us in his tale's ending. At first events proceed as would be expected and Culhwch arrives at Ysbaddaden's court with the annotheu in tow. Indeed, at least one of the tasks – the gathering of the nine hestors of flax seed – we know was carried out before the marriage and must have already been accomplished before Culhwch arrived at Ysbaddaden's court. The growing of the seed would have required considerable time. However, instead of giving the other annotheu to Ysbaddaden and starting the wedding feast, Cadw of Prydein came 'y eillaw y uaryf. kic

⁸⁶ WM, 480. 4–6.
⁸⁷ WM, 481. 14–16.

⁸⁸ WM, 481. 19.

⁸⁹ WM, 476. 28–9.

⁹⁰ WM, 478. 5–7.

⁹¹ WM, 481. 31–3.

⁹² WM, 481. 35–7.

⁹³ WM, 482. 1–2.

⁹⁴ WM, 482. 7–9. This task is not in the Red Book.

⁹⁵ WM, 482. 15–16.

⁹⁶ WM, 482. 28–30.

⁹⁷ WM, 479. 33–5.

a chroen hyt asgwrn ar deuglust yn llwyr',⁹⁸ 'to shave his beard, flesh, and skin completely down to the bone on the two ears'. Not only is this a brutal mutilation, it is a violation of the agreement. It is no wonder that Ysbaddaden asks to be put to death after this torture. This was probably considered a surprise ending by medieval readers.

Culhwch and Olwen has an Author

I have referred numerous times to an author for *Culhwch and Olwen* as distinct from a redactor. As proof that this tale is essentially the product of a single person I point to the pervasive humour, love of the clever and ingenious, and the technique of inserting 'errors' in the text. These are found repeatedly throughout *Culhwch and Olwen*, but are extremely rare in the other tales. These three characteristics thus constitute the distinctive signature of a single author. To this may be added the observation of Bromwich and Evans that, '*Culhwch ac Olwen* is unique among the medieval Welsh tales in respect of its author's evident familiarity with the native learning of the Welsh church'.⁹⁹

The 'Court List'

One of the most commented upon passages in Welsh literature is the so-called 'Court List'. Whatever function this list may play internal to the tale's plot, if any, the real purpose is to display the erudition of its author. About 260 people and animals are mentioned, 244 of which are invoked by Culhwch. In addition, anecdotes often accompany the mention of a name. It has sometimes been suggested that this list is an accretion to the original story and I would agree with this assertion, though for different reasons than have been offered.¹⁰⁰ The text states Culhwch's demand that Arthur help him obtain Olwen as, 'ae hasswynaw a wna' ar dy uilwyr. Asswynaw y gyuarws o honaw ar kei a bedwyr ... arnadunt oll y hasswynwys kulwch mab kilid. y gyuarws', 'And I invoke it by your warriors. He invoked his gift from him by Cei and Bedwyr ... By all those Culhwch mab Cilydd invoked his gift'.¹⁰¹ I contend that this list originated from some other text, independent of *Culhwch and Olwen*, and was merely tacked into the tale. The motivation would likely have been to increase the broad display of lore already highlighted in the tale. The independence of the list is seen in the thirteen or so people said by Ysbaddaden to be inaccessible to Culhwch, but who have already been given as 'warriors' of Arthur by Culhwch.¹⁰² Observe also that if the Court List was composed by the author of *Culhwch and Olwen*, we would expect to see it include nineteen characters who are found assisting Arthur, but are not in the list.¹⁰³ This is especially so since a

⁹⁸ WM, 506. 32–4 = RM 142. 23–4.

⁹⁹ CO, p. lxxix.

¹⁰⁰ CO, p. xlv.

¹⁰¹ WM, 460. 19–470. 16.

¹⁰² These are the dog Drudwyn (since he belongs to Greid mab Eri), a leash, collar, and chain, belonging respectively to Cors Hundred-claws, Canhastyr Hundred-hands, and Cilydd Hundred-holds, Garselit the Irishman, Gwyn mab Nudd, the two pups of the bitch Rhymhi (since Rhymhi is in the list), Cynedyr

the Wild, Gwilenhen king of France, the son of Alun Dyfed, Bulch, Cyfwlch, and Syfwlch, the sons of Cleddyf Cyfwlch. To these may be added Eidoel mab Aer if he is identical to Eidoel mab Ner.

¹⁰³ These are Huandaw, Gogigwr, Laesgymyn, Penpingion, Hygwydd, Gwarthegydd mab Caw, Glythfyr Ledewig (since his dogs are used), Tarawg Allt Clwyd, Rheiddwn mab Eli Adfer, Gwydre mab Arthur, Glew mab Yscawt, Madawg mab Teithion, Gwyn mab Tringad, Eiriawn Penlloran, Cynlas mab

number of these are found in the company of others who are in the Court List. Note in addition, that the list includes twenty women who are unlikely to be termed 'warriors'. Whatever the source text of the Court List, it received significant scholarly attention before being attached to *Culhwch and Olwen* since it is heavily annotated in contrast to the remainder of the story where this is sparse.

That the Court List is not original to the story is also suggested by the circumstances of its articulator who is unlikely to be so knowledgeable. Culhwch describes himself as 'nyt oet y mi etwa wreicca',¹⁰⁴ 'It is not yet an age for me to take a wife'. At this stage in the tale the narrator consistently describes Culhwch as a 'mab' ('boy, lad').¹⁰⁵ Culhwch's ignorance of court etiquette is emphasized by Glewlwyd's long explanation of his own duties and customs of the court.¹⁰⁶ Thus Culhwch's character in the story at this stage is a rather unsophisticated boy. It would be difficult to expect a reader to accept him as a source of lore.

Red Book Scribe: Direct Visual Inspection

Bromwich and Evans state:

The frequent (and often insignificant) substitution of words and phrases for those in the text being copied enforces the conclusion that medieval scribes frequently wrote from dictation rather than from direct visual contact. This would account for R's many departures from W, if we are to conclude that both were following the same archetype with varying degrees of fidelity.¹⁰⁷

As a specific example they point to the sequence 'ym mwyt ... ymual ... yn neuad'¹⁰⁸ saying 'the practice regarding the separation or coalescing of the prep. seems to vary. This may be indicative of a copy made by dictation rather than by the copyist's direct vision.'¹⁰⁹ I fail to follow this logic. The scribes make four types of changes according to their pleasure: they modernize vocabulary and grammar, they correct mistakes, they alter phrasing to taste, and they occasionally add words of clarification. This section is an example of phrasing to taste and has nothing to do with aural or visual copying. As another example Bromwich and Evans give the White Book 'a merch'¹¹⁰ as compared to the Red Book 'am merch'.¹¹¹ They suggest the White Book scribe wrote what he heard. It is just as likely for the scribe's eye to miss one of the adjoining 'm's as it is for his ear to combine the 'm' sounds. Again, these examples do not help us decide one way or the other. However, I offer evidence that at the least the Red Book scribe, Hywel Fychan, was working visually, either from the White Book itself, or from a manuscript with a version of *Culhwch and Olwen*, closely related to it. Consider the red decorated large initials in what remains of the White Book *Culhwch and Olwen*. The Red Book has exactly these same

Cynan, Arwyli mab Gwyddawg Gwyr, Hir Peisawg, and Gwynngelli.

¹⁰⁴ WM, 454. 14–15.

¹⁰⁵ 'kennatau y mab a orucpwynt', 'messengers were sent for the boy' (WM, 454. 8), 'amkawd y mab', 'said the boy' (WM, 454. 13–14), 'lliaw a oruc y mab', 'the boy blushed' (WM, 454. 19–20), 'mynet a oruc y mab', 'the boy set off' (WM, 454. 34–5), 'Amkawd y mab', 'said the boy' (WM, 456. 1), 'Dywedut a oruc y mab',

'the boy said' (WM, 456. 38–39), 'amkawd y mab', 'said the boy' (WM, 459. 17).

¹⁰⁶ WM, 456. 2–38.

¹⁰⁷ CO, p. xiii.

¹⁰⁸ WM, 486. 27–9. The Red Book has a different wording.

¹⁰⁹ CO, p. 139 (n. 772–3).

¹¹⁰ WM, 480. 6.

¹¹¹ JC111, 826. 27–28 = RM, 120. 24

letters as decorated large initials in red and no others, except for one exception.¹¹² This could only happen if the manuscript was inspected visually. It should be borne in mind that the scribe of the Red Book drew his own initials.¹¹³

Date of Culhwch and Olwen Uncertain

The time has come to discuss *Culhwch and Olwen*'s date of composition. Rather I should say its date of composition relative to other works of Welsh literature. It is universally considered that *Culhwch and Olwen* must have taken shape before the other Welsh tales. Arguments for this are based on three observations: the setting of the tale and the culture depicted are during the age of Arthur; certain texts seem to borrow directly from *Culhwch and Olwen*, and the language of the White Book version is older than the language used in the other prose tales. Each of these observations and their implications need a review.

An author is free to place a story in any setting he wishes. An early setting does not imply an early date of composition. The characters thought to have lived at an early period, the prevalence of giants, species altering, special treatment for itinerant craftsman, these are all literary devices used in archaic settings. They do not prove early composition however. Consider the second part of *Manawydan*, where a church hierarchy, money economy and towns with guild systems demonstrate a fairly late date of composition even though the characters are from the dim past, and there is species change. There are nonetheless a few pieces of background setting which may offer a lower absolute limit for the date of composition of the tale. Ysbaddaden's fortress has nine gates.¹¹⁴ If it could be determined when fortresses in Wales first started to have more than one gate, a probable lower absolute date could be set. The answer to this I am forced to leave in the hands of archaeologists. Similarly, Wrnach has a 'kaer uae',¹¹⁵ 'stone fortress' which includes 'teir catlys',¹¹⁶ 'three baileys'. These may also provide important indicators.

Four texts are often claimed to borrow directly from *Culhwch and Olwen*, these being the *Gereint* romance, the *Dream of Rhonabwy*, the poem *Englynion y Clyweit*, and a section of the Welsh version of the *Seven Sages of Rome*. With regard to the first three texts, Bromwich and Evans referring to court lists state, 'it is plain that each of them is separately derived from the list in CO'.¹¹⁷ Their reasoning is simply that some of the names are shared among the various texts and *Culhwch and Olwen*. This proves nothing one way or the other and one can say only that a body of names and perhaps some anecdotes were held in common. This applies also to any relationship between *Culhwch and Olwen* and *Pa Gur* and the *Triads*. There is however a definite connection between *Culhwch and Olwen* and

¹¹² The words with decorated large initials are Kjlyd (WM, 452. 1–JC111, 810. 1 = RM, 100. 1), Ac (WM, 457. 21–JC111, 813. 13 = RM, 104. 10), Asswynaw (WM, 460. 21–JC111, 815. 3 = RM, 106. 14), Y (WM, 469. 27–JC111, 820. 8 = RM, 112. 22), Arthur (WM, 470. 17–JC111, 820. 29 = RM, 113. 10), Mynet (WM, 472. 8–JC111, 821. 37 = RM, 114. 23), Kerdet (WM, 486. 5–JC111, 830. 43 = RM, 126. 1). The one exception is that in the Red Book we have Y dywawt (JC111, 826. 14 = RM, 120. 13) with large capital Y in red. The equivalent passage in the White

Book has Dywawt with un-rubricated normal size letters (WM, 479. 27).

¹¹³ Daniel Huws, 'Llyfr Coch Hergest', *Cyfoeth y Testun*, eds. Iestyn Daniel, Marged Haycock, Dafydd Johnston, Jenny Rowland (Cardiff, 2003), 1–30, pp. 18–20.

¹¹⁴ WM, 477. 2.

¹¹⁵ WM, 486. 7.

¹¹⁶ WM, 488. 12.

¹¹⁷ CO, p. xl.

Rhonabwy. This is found in the misunderstanding of Cadwy mab Gereint in both the White and Red Book manuscripts of *Culhwch and Olwen* and in the text of *Rhonabwy*.¹¹⁸ The readings are respectively 'ac adwy .m. gereint',¹¹⁹ 'ac adwy mab gereint',¹²⁰ and 'ac adwy uab gereint'.¹²¹ It cannot be doubted that copying is taking place, but in which direction? Since in *Rhonabwy*, Osla Big-knife is Arthur's adversary while in *Culhwch and Olwen* he is an eager ally, it is unlikely that either tale borrows directly from the other. The most plausible explanation is that both copy from the independent text postulated above to have been inserted as the 'Court List' of *Culhwch and Olwen*.

Though discussed relatively little in the secondary literature, the most direct connection of any section of *Culhwch and Olwen* to another text is with *Chwedleu Seith Doethon Rufein*.¹²² This story is a Welsh translation/adaptation of a tale found in versions in Hebrew, Arabic and a host of European languages. The Welsh version is found in three medieval manuscripts, Jesus College 20, the Red Book of Hergest, both dating to about the same time, and Llanstephan 2 dating to the middle of the fifteenth century. There are also more recent manuscripts of this text. It is not impossible that this story was inscribed on some of the lost quires of the White Book. Unusually, *Chwedleu Seith Doethon Rufein* is given in superscriptions and colophons as being written by a named author, a certain Llewelyn Offeiriad. *ChSDR* has wording that is essentially identical to sections from three of the prose tales including *Owein*, *Breuddwyd Maxen*, and *Culhwch and Olwen*.¹²³ It seems to me more likely that a single author having a taste for the prose tales would borrow from them rather than that different authors would all borrow from this one text. The consequence of this reasoning is that *ChSDR* is likely later than at least these three tales. In summary, though *Culhwch and Olwen* shares features in common with a number of works, these commonalities are of no help in dating this story.

We have now to treat the archaic language found in the White Book version of *Culhwch and Olwen*. Bromwich and Evans show in exquisite detail that the grammar and vocabulary is indeed archaic.¹²⁴ They make the following general assessment:

the language of *Culhwch ac Olwen* is archaic and belongs to the end of the OW period, and that it shows a greater similarity to the language of the early poetry and that of the *Gogynfeirdd*, as well as to the earliest fragments of OW prose preserved in the Laws and other documents, than to the language of the later prose tales.¹²⁵

The assumption being made here is that the age of the language used in a text sets an upper bound for the date of composition of that text. I am critical of this assumption. Setting aside *Culhwch and Olwen* for the moment, a number of observations may be made. For any given tale, versions in more recent medieval manuscripts have a definite tendency to modernize the language and to correct mistakes in older manuscripts. The language employed in any given tale in any given manuscript is quite similar to that used in any other tale in any other manuscript. These tales are thought by most scholars to have reached essentially their present form at some time during the period of the early

¹¹⁸ *CO*, p. 71 (n. 182).

¹¹⁹ *WM*, 460. 31–2.

¹²⁰ *JCI*, 815. 11 = *RM*, 106. 21–22.

¹²¹ *JCI*, 570. 7 = *RM*, 159. 27.

¹²² The only extensive discussion is found in Henry Lewis, *Chwedleu Seith Doethon Rufein* (Cardiff, 1958), and is based to a large extent on the work of J. Loth.

¹²³ The specific quotes are found in H. Lewis, *ChSDR*, pp. 24–6.

¹²⁴ *CO*, p. xv–xxv.

¹²⁵ *CO*, p. lxxxiii.

Gogynfeirdd (c.1150). It seems to me that this would hardly have been enough time for these tales to have reached canonical form and become part of a fixed corpus by 1275 when they first begin to appear in our surviving manuscripts, then reached the status of antiquarian relics by the time of the White Book (c.1350), and finally drop from sight after the Red Book (c.1400).¹²⁶ Regardless, even if we use a date of 1150 or earlier for *Culhwch and Olwen*,¹²⁷ how did the White Book version come to have such archaic language in distinction from all other versions of all other tales including the Red Book version of *Culhwch and Olwen* itself? In addition, note that the White Book version is a copy of an even earlier manuscript since *WM*, 467. 36–468. 5 was left blank by the White Book scribe.¹²⁸ Surely, this is because his exemplar was either illegible or destroyed at this point. It seems quite possible then that the White Book scribes, and likely the scribe of the exemplar, afforded special treatment to *Culhwch and Olwen* and did not modernize the language. Motivation for such treatment could have been to use early language to match the apparent time of the story's action. The scribe may have purposely and quite innovatively used anachronistic language. This is of course an hypothesis, but I think it more likely than that the White Book retained a genuine archaic version. This is especially attractive since the Red Book scribe consistently modernized the language. He did so even though as was demonstrated above, he was working with the White Book version or a close relative. If this hypothesis is true then *Culhwch and Olwen* could still hold the distinction of being the oldest of the tales, but it could also be of any other date, even the youngest of the tales.

¹²⁶ A number of other tales referred to among the eleven survivors were completely removed from the corpus by 1275.

¹²⁷ A date after 1081 is suggested by Idris Foster (*CO*, p. lxxxii).

¹²⁸ There are two scribes involved in the writing of

the White Book *Culhwch and Olwen*. One of these was the scribe of all the other native tales in the White Book except for *Gereint*. The other was the scribe of *Gereint*. For this see Daniel Huws, 'Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch', in *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts* (Cardiff, 2000), 227–68, p. 231.