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Written text as performance: the implications for Middle Welsh prose narratives

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Over the past thirty years the study of orality and literacy, and the interaction between them, has developed into an extremely fruitful multi-disciplinary field of research. Much scholarship has concentrated on the *effects* of literacy, the main thesis being that literacy leads to a number of social, literary and cognitive changes.¹ The contention is that the development of writing (and communication media in general, including print and telecommunication) leads to general developments or social patterns, which are seen as beneficial to society – the results of literacy are discussed in such terms as ‘progress’, ‘development’, ‘modernization’.² This ‘autonomous’ model, informed by technological determinism, has been challenged in particular by Street’s ‘ideological’ model and Finnegan’s ‘weak’ theory of literacy.³ They argue that the picture is far more complex, and that the effects of literacy may be diverse rather than single. To them, the ‘Great Divide Theory’, a term coined by Finnegan, claims too much; literacy and orality have co-existed and interacted along the centuries, and continue to do so. As Street emphasizes, ‘the social reality is always a mix’.⁴ This is certainly true of medieval Wales.

This essay will focus on the collection of eleven medieval Welsh prose tales known as the *Mabinogion*, a collective title which was first used in Lady Charlotte Guest’s English translation of the tales.⁵ It must be stressed that the term is almost certainly a scribal error found in a single manuscript. Nevertheless, it has become a convenient label to describe this corpus of medieval tales, although they should not be perceived as a unified collection of any kind – they all vary in date, authorship, sources, background and content. The eleven tales survive in the Red Book of Hergest (c. 1400), while ten (some incomplete) are to be found in the White Book of Rhydderch (c. 1350).⁶ Fragments also occur in manuscripts earlier by a hundred years or so. It is unclear whether the texts represent the earliest attempts at recording

narrative prose in the Welsh language, or whether they are merely the earliest surviving examples.⁷ The chronology and dating of the tales are also problematic, which complicates issues concerning the relationship between individual texts. However, it is probably safe to assume that they were written down some time between the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries, against a background of vast change in the history of Wales.⁸ During this period the Welsh struggled to retain their independence in the face of the Anglo-Norman conquest which ultimately transformed the society, economy and church of Wales. On a cultural level there were changes too: for example, foreign influences on native prose and poetry, although it must be remembered that literary influences were not all one-way, as reflected clearly in the transmission of Welsh Arthurian material to the Continent. As regards content, the tales vary greatly. Resonances of Celtic mythology are found in the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, as the author uses traditional material to reinforce his own views regarding proper social conduct. *Culhwch and Olwen*'s dove-tailing of two well-known international themes, the Giant's Daughter and the Jealous Stepmother, serves as a framework for a series of independent Arthurian tales, in which Arthur, together with warriors such as Cai and Bedwyr, helps Culhwch win his bride. The relationship between *Owein*, *Peredur* and *Gereint* (known collectively as the three 'romances') and the corresponding metrical romances of Chrétien de Troyes has been a source of much controversy. The Welsh romances certainly betray foreign influences, yet remain structurally and stylistically within the Welsh narrative tradition. *The Encounter of Lludd and Llefelys* first appears, in an abbreviated form, in a thirteenth-century translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. The story relates how Lludd overcomes three oppressions that came to Britain, and draws on the same pseudo-historical background as *The Dream of Maxen*. In his dream, the Roman emperor Magnus Maximus meets a maiden whom he eventually marries, and this is followed by a collection of onomastic tales and an account of the founding of Brittany. A second dream, *The Dream of Rhonabwy*, presents a satirical view of the Arthurian past, and is an extremely sophisticated piece of writing, probably the latest tale of the corpus.⁹

These eleven tales are not written versions of oral stories, but rather the result of composition-in-writing. However, it is certain that the authors were drawing on oral material to varying degrees: these are

what can be termed as 'oral-derived texts' rather than 'unambiguously oral texts'.¹⁰ The author of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, for example, states clearly on three separate occasions that he is drawing on *cyfarwyddyd* (traditional tales), implying that he is using more than one tale and combining them to form a composite work.¹¹ If the authors of the written texts are to a large extent dependent on traditional material as regards *what* they say, then is the same true of *how* they say it? Or are the stylistic features of the written texts totally divorced from the oral performance of the *cyfarwyddiaid* (story-tellers)? Roberts argues, rightly, that the oral narrator's relationship to his text is different from that of the author. He continues:

In the one case we see a performer, a variable text, a knowledgeable audience; stylistically we have a composition based on formulae, or at least conventional phrases, and familiar situations; structurally the text will be linear, chronological, and sequential. The written text, however, is fixed and it will be read rather than performed; its narration may be less direct but will lend itself to experimentation and its style will be less bound by convention, but it will be open to audience participation of a different kind, as listeners ponder the meaning of the narrative or enjoy literary skills more subtle than the purely aural.¹²

However, the majority of medieval written texts were composed for oral delivery, and as such it could be argued that they, too, were *performances* in their own right: their actual enactment was necessarily a vital part of their impact. As stressed by Finnegan, the audience would see as well as hear the reader, so that kinesic elements such as gestures and facial expressions would continue to play an important part, as well as any other communication media (musical features, acoustic and visual elements).¹³ As with an oral performance, aural audiences still had only the spoken moment in which to grasp meaning: 'the mediaeval listeners could not glance back a few pages if they lost track of the story for a moment'.¹⁴ It should be emphasized, therefore, that although the composer now has the time to create at leisure, although he is free from the pressures of extempore composition, nevertheless he still has to bear in mind the *reception* and *dissemination* of his work. Coleman argues convincingly that mediaeval audiences actually *chose* to listen to readings, even if they were themselves literate, because of 'the excitement of live performance, the intensification of aesthetic experience, the social bonding, the intellectual stimulation, and the cultural affirmation available in the high-

context environment of public reading', so that there would be a continuous interaction between text, reader and hearers, rendering the parchment 'interactive'.¹⁵

Unfortunately, direct evidence for the reading aloud of narrative texts in medieval Wales is scanty. It is probably safe to assume that many of the patrons of medieval Welsh manuscripts could themselves read. However, comparative evidence would suggest that oral and aural (and visual) culture was the only choice for the majority. Turning to the *Mabinogion* corpus, we find few references to books and to reading. The colophon at the end of *The Dream of Rhonabwy* claims that neither poet nor story-teller knew the tale 'heb lyuyr' ('without a book'), suggesting that the tale was commonly read, not recited. In the second branch of the *Mabinogi*, Branwen's letter is read out to her brother, the king – compare the role of the priest at the king's court, who must, according to the evidence of the law-books, be 'ready and unintoxicated at the king's need, to write letters and to read them'.¹⁶ Gerald of Wales refers more than once to reading aloud, as, for instance, in the following passage, which provides an example of voluntary auralty: 'While we were in Brecon, I, Gerald, the Archdeacon of the place, presented to the Archbishop a copy of my own far from negligible work called *The Topography of Ireland*. The Archbishop received it graciously and read a portion of it with close attention each day during the journey, or else had it read to him'.¹⁷ A few references to reading are found in the works of the medieval Welsh poets, although the research has been far from exhaustive. In the fourteenth century Iolo Goch describes Ithel Ddu as 'orau . . . darlleawdr ar dir Llëyn' ('the best reader in the land of Llëyn'),¹⁸ while Lewys Glyn Cothi in the fifteenth century draws a comparison between reading and reciting from memory, and mentions reading aloud to his patron.¹⁹ Therefore, although the Welsh evidence is scanty, one must accept the possibility of a twofold reception of literature in a society largely but not completely illiterate: public as well as private reading. References to an acoustic reception may be missing because it was regarded as so self-evident as not to warrant mention. Indeed, this is supported by an examination of some of the structural and stylistic features of the *Mabinogion* tales.²⁰

The main thesis, therefore, is that the stylistic and structural features of Welsh narrative prose tales have been greatly influenced by (1) the art of the oral story-teller and (2) the aural reception of the written texts: in other words by the demands of *performance*, so that

those traits that are usually described as 'oral' should not be regarded merely as a residue of the oral past, but as functional within a literate context. For the purposes of this essay, a few illustrations will have to suffice, and comments will be confined to reflections on the structure of the tales, and the use of formulae.²¹

In the field of narrative structure, the discussion will focus on three features that are generally recognized as important in the context of an oral performance because of their significance in the *reception processes* of oral narrative. First, the length of and unit of performance will be considered. Clover argues that the medieval Icelandic prose sagas reflect a literary development – a phenomenon linked perhaps to memory, for the performer cannot compose or the audience remember tales that are beyond a certain length.²² Long prose forms, she argues, came into existence only with the emergence of a reading class. She looks towards non-European traditions to support her thesis, and quotes Biebuyck's remarks on the contemporary Mwindo material, and Finnegan's on the *Lianja*: 'It is not at all certain that the traditional pattern was not in fact a very loosely related bundle of separate episodes, told on separate occasions and not necessarily thought of as one single work of art . . . By now, of course, its circulation as a composite written narrative among sophisticated audiences has, in a sense, established 'The Tale of Lianja' as a kind of (prose) epic in its own right'.²³ However, although it could be argued that the episode was the all-important narrative unit, Biebuyck, Okpewho and others have argued convincingly that the 'whole' did exist as an immanent or potential entity. Kellogg outlines the theory:

Every performance of traditional narrative takes place in a vast context of story, and must be understood so by the critic . . . I am left, therefore, with skepticism that a long narrative can exist in oral tradition as a single 'work' separate from the tradition as a whole . . . The usual instruction to the performer would be 'sing us the episode of such and such', with its fit into the unperformed whole being a task for members of the audience, accomplished more or less satisfactorily depending on their knowledge of tradition.²⁴

Secondly, repetition (of narrative events and of verbal phrases or formulae) is generally regarded as one of the main characteristics of oral literature. This makes sense in practice, due to the ephemeral nature of oral prose or poetry.²⁵ Olrik, in his seminal article 'Epic laws of folk narrative', draws particular attention to tripartite repetition – *das Gesetz der Dreizahl* – which, he argues, creates suspense,

focuses attention, and is an integral part of the structure of western European oral narrative.²⁶ Finally, comparative evidence suggests that the structure of oral prose narrative *tends* to be linear, chronological and sequential, with a tendency towards conjunctive cohesion. One reason for this is surely the influence of memory on any orally performed narrative. Compare, for example, Rosenberg's remarks on the structure of sermons:

Memory . . . exerts pressure on the sequence of clauses within a sentence. Clauses tend to be generated chronologically, matching their sequence to the sequence of the sentences describing them. Memory performs better with temporally arranged sentences . . . Clearly the events have an effect on the way sentences are organized. The simplest sort of plot structure characterizes the stories in the sermons: a straightforward single-strand narrative, each episode of which is introduced by such formulas as 'after a while' and 'by and by'.²⁷

Such structural features also ease the process of listening, understanding and transmitting, as reflected in the pioneering work of Bartlett and other cognitive psychologists who have examined how story patterns are stored in the mind.²⁸

These three features are reflected in varying degrees in the synchronic or horizontal structure of the *Mabinogion* tales. First, an attempt was made to discover how the authors (or scribes) viewed their own texts, and whether the presentation of the written material betrayed contemporary ideas regarding the arrangement of narrative. As noted by Doyle and Parkes, 'layout and decoration function like punctuation: they are part of the presentation of a text which facilitates its use by a reader'.²⁹ Huws emphasizes that the Welsh scribes were not as sophisticated as their continental counterparts in their use of capitals to divide their texts, yet examples of the technique can be found.³⁰ One further consideration in this context is to what extent we can attribute to the scribe himself a dynamic and determinative role. A. N. Doane, in his discussion of Anglo-Saxon poetry, argues that the scribe is a special kind of speaking performer, in the ethnographic sense: as he copies from one manuscript to another, he recreates the transmitted message through his own performance within the tradition, reflecting his communicative competence within that tradition. This is reflected beyond verbal variation, in features such as spacing and word division which, Doane suggests, 'seem to stand for the very features of phonic speech that modern textuality

does not formally mark, such as rhetorical pauses, rhetorical word-stress, and variation of pitch and loudness'.³¹ This seems to be an avenue well worth exploring in the medieval Welsh manuscripts. Instances can be found in the Red Book of Hergest, for example, where rubrication is used, in the absence of speech markers, to highlight character switching in dialogue passages. For the purpose of this essay, however, since the focus is on the macro-structure of the texts, remarks will be confined to the use of large initials. There are no divisions within the *Four Branches*, apart from large initials at the beginning of each branch, nor within the short *Encounter of Lludd and Llefelys* and the two dream visions. *Owein* is divided into five sections in the Red Book version (three sections are of a similar length). There are three sections to *Gereint* in the White Book, and only two in the Red Book version, but it should be noted that the divisions occur towards the beginning of the narrative, and draw attention to scene and character switching ('his story so far', 'Gereint's story so far', 'their story so far'), which is surely a mark of written narrative. Yet this tells us nothing of the reception: compare the use of *uchod* ('above') in the third branch.³² The Red and White Book versions of *Peredur* are divided into three sections of 35, 13³/₄ and 13 columns. However, it must be stressed that *Peredur* has a complex manuscript tradition, for fragments of the tale also occur in Peniarth MSS 7 and 14, raising questions regarding the 'fixed' version of *Peredur*.³³ The text of *Culhwch and Olwen* is divided sixteen times by large initials, with slight variation between the Red and White Book versions. Nine examples appear in the final section of the tale, which relates the accomplishing of the tasks set by the giant, and some of these episodes are extremely short, a few lines in some instances. The pattern in *Culhwch* is, therefore, rather different, implying that several independent tales were brought together for the final part of the quest and that the scribe saw them as such since the divisions are visually marked in the manuscript. It is difficult to decide what is represented by this final section; some scholars have drawn comparisons with the 'summary style' of Old Irish tales, and have argued that the story-teller would expand his material during the performance.³⁴ Perhaps the summarized sections of *Culhwch and Olwen* are merely an outline of what could be accomplished during an oral performance. This tale certainly makes demands on a reader, as reflected in the summarized formulae which would surely be expanded during a public reading.

Since the manuscript layout on the whole did not prove to be very revealing, the next step was to examine whether any other evidence of narrative division was apparent in the written material. Phrases relating to time, such as 'once upon a time', 'one afternoon', 'one day', often function as a boundary between one event and the next in oral narrative, fulfilling what Bauman calls a 'scene-setting function'.³⁵ Such phrases were found to be extremely common in many of the *Mabinogion* tales, and were often found to coincide with the few examples of large initials in the manuscripts. It was also found that episodes were 'framed' by verbal repetition or phrases, common to single tales rather than to the corpus as a whole. The implication is that such repetition would function as a signal to a listening audience, clearly emphasizing the beginning of a new episode. The basic structure of the *Four Branches*, for example, is chronological and highly episodic. 'Once', 'one day', 'one afternoon' are often employed to mark new episodes, together with verbal repetition. For example, the beginning of the second major episode of the first branch echoes the opening of the tale: 'And once he was at Arberth, a chief court of his.' The journey also seems to function as a boundary between one episode and the next, linked with a return to Arberth in the first and third branches, and to travel to and from Ireland in the second branch. Indeed, it could be argued that the *episodes* were the narrative units that were taken by the author from oral tradition, and that on the model proposed by Clover, he was the first to combine them into a long composite text, arranged into four 'branches', although audiences may have been aware of an immanent whole.³⁶ This is borne out by the author's references to his sources, for he refers to several sources rather than one *cyfarwyddyd*, and also by the fact that medieval triads and poetry refer to individual characters and events rather than to the 'branches' as organic units.³⁷ As well as large initials, verbal repetition has a narrative function in *Culhwch and Olwen* too. Arthur's words 'Which of the marvels is it best to seek first?' open three episodes, while use is also made of scene-setting phrases such as 'one day'. It should also be noted that verbal repetition is an important feature in the giant's listing of the tasks. The dialogue between Culhwch and the giant – 'Hawd yw genhyf gaffel hynny kyd tybyckych na bo hawd. Kyt keffych hynny yssyd ny cheffych.' ('It is easy for me to get that, although you think it will not be easy.' 'Although you may get that, there is something you will not get.') – is written out in full several times, then summarized in

various permutations until it eventually becomes two words – 'Hawd. Kyt' ('Easy. Although'). This section is therefore held together by the verbal repetition which functions as a chorus of sorts, as suggested by Matchak – 'the formulas act as structural conjunctions which ease the process of listing the anoethu' – and, I would add, the process of listening to them.³⁸ Turning to the 'romances', a variation on the phrase 'The emperor Arthur was at Caer Llion on Usk' opens *Owein* and *Gereint*, while the phrase occurs once again in *Gereint* and twice in *Peredur* to signal a new major episode. The romance, of course, is episodic by nature as the hero undergoes a series of adventures. Verbal repetition links the episodes in *Gereint* and *Peredur* ('And he went on his way', or a variation on the formula), while in *Owein* the phrase 'he travelled the bounds of the world and its wilderness' occurs three times to mark sub-episodes in the penultimate section of the tale. In the romances, the episodes are not usually causally linked, but rather they form a series of juxtaposed events, and cohesion is maintained by means of this 'chorus effect'.³⁹ The three shorter tales of the *Mabinogion* corpus can be regarded as complete entities. Although based on the theme of the *three* oppressors, the *Encounter of Lludd and Llefelys* draws little on the art of the story-teller. The *Dream of Maxen* is basically composed of two moves, each move ending with an onomastic tag which, as noted by Hunter, would have been an important aide-mémoire to the oral story-teller.⁴⁰ The structure of *The Dream of Rhonabwy* is rather different in that the first section is chronological, but then the tale proceeds in disjointed narrative fragments, rather like a real dream. Indeed, the narrative runs backwards, parodying the *ordo naturalis* of the other tales, and surely making more demands on the audience.⁴¹ Yet the author makes use of verbal repetition as Rhonabwy asks his guide nine times for an explanation of events, thus employing a traditional technique not to link episodes, but rather to give information to the audience.

Once an attempt had been made to recognize the major divisions in the longer narrative texts, their length was then analysed, together with the lengths of the complete shorter tales. Chaytor, among others, has argued that many medieval romances were intended to be recited in episodes, and so the unity of action is not always apparent: 'how much recitation at a time was either demanded by the audience or supported by the reciter is a matter of sheer conjecture; but the "lay-out" of the matter indicates that convenient halting-places were clearly marked'.⁴² Some scholars have undertaken mathematical

analyses of medieval texts,⁴³ and have argued for mathematical symmetry in the metrical narratives of Chrétien de Troyes. Ryding is sceptical, and argues that most such speculation is circular: 'the usual thing is to divide the story first into logically coherent units, then to estimate their average length, and then to assume that to have been the length of the performance'.⁴⁴ Some tentative suggestions can be made regarding narrative divisions in the *Mabinogion*, based on the methodology outlined above. The major episodes within the *Four Branches* average between 8 and 12 columns of the White Book text.⁴⁵ *The Dream of Maxen* is $12\frac{3}{4}$ columns in total, and *The Encounter of Lludd and Llefelys* is $8\frac{1}{2}$ columns in total; the three main sections of *Owein* occupy between 10 and 11 columns, while two of the three major sections of *Peredur* are of similar length ($13\frac{3}{4}$ and 13 columns). *Culhwch and Olwen* is composed of very short episodes, yet it has been argued that the tale has an overall tripartite structure (separated by the listing of Arthur's men and the listing of the tasks) of 20, 14 and 21 columns.⁴⁶ *The Dream of Rhonabwy* is $22\frac{1}{4}$ columns in total, *Branwen* $23\frac{1}{4}$ columns, and *Manawydan* 20 columns. These figures may well suggest some sort of numerical clustering. However, it is acknowledged that the methodology needs much refining, and that further research needs to be undertaken in the reading aloud and timing of narrative sections.

Examples of repetition (and especially tripartite repetition) are abundant within the corpus. In the *Four Branches*, for example, Pwyll sees Rhiannon on three consecutive days; Gwydion and Gilfaethwy are transformed three times into animals; Aranrhod places three curses on her son. However, the technique can be used to a literary effect as in the first section of *The Dream of Maxen* and in *Owein*, where the narrative focuses on three journeys.⁴⁷ The author of *The Dream of Rhonabwy*, in particular, plays with the technique in the overtly mechanical description of the chess game. Repetition arising from the giving of advice and instructions also features prominently in the tales, such as Arawn's instructions to Pwyll that he should give but one blow to Hafgan, and Bendigeidfran's instructions to the seven survivors regarding the talismanic burial of his head. Nicolaisen's comment on Irish folktales is relevant, namely that characters are given anticipatory advice which 'often takes the form of lengthy, sequential and, in their compulsory detail, bizarre instructions which demand absolute adherence if the dangerous task is to be successfully accomplished'.⁴⁸ Not only is an element of suspense introduced into

the narrative, but such repetition ensures that the listener is continuously reminded of the course of events.

As regards the micro-structure of the written texts, conjunctive cohesion is certainly a feature that has been explored by many wishing to draw up a list of benchmarks of oral composition.⁴⁹ A survey of contemporary oral narrative in the Welsh Folk Museum Archive further proves the point: short clauses, linked by *a* ('and'), *yna* ('then') are the norm. This feature, it has been argued, is a reflection of the fragmented nature of spoken language, as opposed to the integrated nature of written language, and of the theory that spoken language is produced in spurts, or idea units.⁵⁰ Each of the *Mabinogion* tales depends heavily on conjunctive cohesion. However, it should be noted that this is a common feature of medieval Welsh prose in general. There has been, as yet, no detailed comparative research in this field, although one is left with the impression that *a* ('and') occurs far more frequently in the native tales.⁵¹

Reference has already been made to the function of verbal repetition within individual texts. However, a close analysis of the *Mabinogion* tales shows that certain phrases are common to more than one tale, that is, the authors seem to be drawing on a common pool of formulae or traditional patterns. Much has been written on the significance of the formula in oral poetry, ever since the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord on Homeric diction and South Slavic heroic songs.⁵² However, there is little agreement on whether formulaic style must imply oral composition, whether literacy and oral composition are always mutually exclusive. Evidence of formulaic diction is plentiful in medieval poetry, although composition was in writing. As Bäuml argues, 'In general, medieval vernacular literacy exhibits characteristics of orality in the processes of composition as well as reception. These characteristics doubtless included some of the functions of formulae and themes: though they no longer served as necessary tools for composition and reception, they yet facilitated the retention, and therefore the reception, of the read or heard written text.'⁵³ Metre is an integral part of the Parry-Lord formula. However, many scholars have shown that formulae are also a distinct feature of orally transmitted prose, and have been critical of the disproportionate emphasis which has been placed on verse narration in formula research.⁵⁴ Admittedly, these are not formulae in the Parry-Lord sense, yet they are an integral part of oral prose narrative. Their presence in medieval written literature certainly does not point to oral

composition, but rather implies that the authors were aware of the technique and realized its usefulness as far as composition and reception were concerned.

The authors of the *Mabinogion* tales draw on a stock of stereotyped forms of expression or formulae.⁵⁵ *Verbatim formulae* are restricted to greetings and oaths, while *variable formulae*, where identity is established by similar structural patterns and repetition of key words, are far more common. The latter may be divided into two categories. First, formulaic units are combined to give a longer formula, when describing physical appearance, combat, approach to a building or location, feasting, transition from one day to the next. In the second category there is but a single formulaic unit, employed to open and close a tale, to take counsel, and to describe horses. Opening formulae, for example, are important in any oral performance: it is a common practice to open with a phrase setting the tale in the remote past, such as 'one day', 'one afternoon'.⁵⁶ In the *Mabinogion* tales this is often preceded with a reference to the hero, his status and location: for example, 'Pwyll pendeuic dyuet a oed yn arglwyd ar seith cantref dyuet' ('Pwyll prince of Dyfed was lord over the seven cantrefs of Dyfed'). Often in oral performances, there will be a direct address to the audience before the tale begins, as reflected in English and French romances,⁵⁷ although this may have become conventionalized diction in written texts. There are no examples in the native Welsh corpus, in contrast to the opening of the Middle Welsh translation of *Otinell* where the author asks for silence.⁵⁸ The closing formulae, on the other hand, close the frame and bring the performance to an end. In the *Mabinogion* tales it is either stated categorically that the tale is at an end – 'velly y tervyna . . .' ('and so ends . . .') – or the title of the tale is given, 'a'r chwedyl hwn a elwir . . .' ('and this tale is called . . .') – or both features are combined. Such formulae give us an insight into contemporary views regarding the idea of a 'text'. The closing formula of the White and Red Book versions of *Peredur*, for example, refers only to the last episode – 'Ac velly y treythir o Gaer yr Ynryfedodeu' ('And so is it told of the Castle of Wonders') – while a common formula closes the Peniarth 7 version which ends in *Peredur's* marriage to the empress – 'Ac y velly y t[er]vyna kynnyd paredur ap Efracw' ('And so ends the progress of *Peredur* son of Efrog'). This raises questions regarding not only the performance of *Peredur* but also, as noted earlier, the very nature of the 'fixed' text.

The *Mabinogion* corpus displays many more features that are an

integral part of oral narrative performance and that create *involvement* between the story-teller and his audience, for example the use of direct speech, and (perhaps) tense switching. The suggestion is, therefore, that the *Mabinogion* tales, in their written form, were tales to be performed – some, I would argue, more successfully than others. Needless to say, this has been a general overview, a procedure which, I admit, is in itself open to criticism. A closer analysis would show that each tale has its own particular structural and stylistic features, yet this can only be fully appreciated in the general context of the medieval Welsh prose narrative tradition. The written texts are a window on medieval oral story-telling; they provide us with an insight into the narrative techniques and performance of the *cyfarwydd* and encode vestiges of oral traditional performances. But, as has been suggested, they are also performances in their own right. The authors *chose* to include traditional formulae in their written narratives: they made use of tripartism, of chronological, episodic structure, of verbal repetition, of conjunctive cohesion, of formulaic diction, not only because they had inherited these techniques from oral tradition, but also because they viewed their written texts as performances for a hearing public – such techniques were functional within a literate context. It could also be argued that these texts are 'performances' in the folkloristic sense, based upon an understanding of performance as a 'mode of speaking':

performance represents a transformation of the basic referential . . . uses of language. In other words, in artistic performance of this kind, there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, 'interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey.' This may lead to the further suggestion that performance sets up, or represents, an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal.⁵⁹

As emphasized by Foley, the situated 'words' encode a set of different, highly focused meanings within this performance frame or arena, and convey a message indexed by other than textual strategies (for example, the use of onomastics, place-names, nicknames, triads), so that the listener must 'fill out' spoken images.⁶⁰ Such 'word power' stems from the empowering event of performance. Features that are employed to 'key performance', that is to mark the discourse as a communication to be received by co-participants in a particular way,

can be seen to exist in the *Mabinogion* texts: for example, special formulae, parallelism, appeal to tradition. However, we today must be aware of such signals, and must attempt to decode them if we are to reinvest the *Mabinogion* texts with their power of performance.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, and *Muse Learns to Write*; Goody, *Domestication*, and *Interface*; Goody (ed.), *Literacy*; Ong, *Orality*.
- 2 For an excellent overview, see Finnegan, *Literacy*, pp. 1–15.
- 3 Street, *Literacy*; Finnegan, *Literacy*.
- 4 Street, *Literacy*, p. 61.
- 5 *Mabinogion*, trans. Guest. For a more recent translation, see *Mabinogion*, trans. Jones and Jones.
- 6 For a discussion of the manuscripts, see Huws, 'Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch', and G. Charles-Edwards, 'Scribes'.
- 7 Cf. Sims-Williams, above, pp. 27–8.
- 8 For the historical background, see, for example, R. R. Davies, *Conquest* and Walker, *Medieval Wales*.
- 9 For a general introduction to the tales and their background, see Mac Cana, *Mabinogi*, and Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*.
- 10 These terms are defined by Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, pp. 5–8.
- 11 It should be noted that *cyfarwyddyd*, meaning 'tale' or 'narrative', reflects the later semantic development of a noun which originally meant 'traditional lore' or 'traditional learning' (see Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 2). The term itself is connected etymologically with 'knowledge', 'guidance', 'perception'. The *cyfarwydd* was therefore the 'guide', 'well-informed person', 'expert', and later the 'story-teller': Mac Cana, *Learned Tales*, pp. 132–41.
- 12 Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 82.
- 13 Finnegan, *Literacy*, p. 78. For an introduction to current theories on 'performance', see Finnegan, *Oral Traditions*, pp. 91–111.
- 14 Crosby, 'Oral delivery', 107.
- 15 Coleman, 'Interactive parchment', 79. See also *eadem*, 'Solace of hearing' and *Public Reading*.
- 16 *Cyfreithiau Hywel Dda*, ed. Williams and Powell, p. 13. My translation.
- 17 Gerald of Wales, *Journey*, trans. Thorpe, pp. 80–1.
- 18 *Gwaith Iolo Goch*, ed. Johnston, p. 99.
- 19 Roberts, 'Ystoria', 14.
- 20 D. H. Green, *Medieval Listening* examines the whole spectrum of genres, and considers the criteria for assessing what works were destined for listeners, what examples anticipated readers and how far both modes of reception could apply to one work. It would be extremely useful to adapt his methodology, as far as possible, to the Welsh data.
- 21 For a detailed analysis of the stylistic and structural features of all eleven tales, see S. Davies, *Creffft y Cyfarwydd*.

- 22 Clover, 'Long prose form'.
- 23 Finnegan, *Oral Literature*, pp. 109–10. See also Biebuyck, 'Epic', and Okpewho, 'Does the epic exist?'.
- 24 Kellogg, 'Varieties of tradition', pp. 124–5.
- 25 See, for example, Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, pp. 126–9. Cf. Ong's comment: 'redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track': *Orality*, p. 40. However, it must be emphasized that repetition should not be used as a touchstone for differentiating between oral and written styles, for repetition has great aesthetic value in a literary work.
- 26 Olrik, 'Epic laws'. M. Lüthi, on the other hand, prefers to discuss tripartite repetition in terms of imitation and anticipation – repetition is a static phenomenon, while anticipation is dynamic and leads to realization: see 'Imitation'. Cf. also R. M. Jones's remarks on tripartism in Welsh literature: 'Tri mewn llenyddiaeth'.
- 27 Rosenberg, 'Message', p. 154.
- 28 F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering*. For a detailed discussion of medieval memory, see Carruthers, *Book of Memory*.
- 29 Doyle and Parkes, 'Production of copies', p. 186.
- 30 Huws, 'Llyfrau Cymraeg', 10. See McCann's analysis of the three Welsh romances: 'Adeiledd y Tair Rhamant'. The layout of all eleven tales is discussed in detail in my *Creffft y Cyfarwydd*.
- 31 Doane, 'Ethnography', 425.
- 32 The third branch is a continuation of the second, and opens thus: 'When the seven men we spoke of above had buried the head of Bendigeidfran in the White Mount in London . . .' (*Mabinogion*, trans. Jones and Jones, p. 41).
- 33 Lloyd-Morgan discusses the structure of the tale in detail in 'Narrative structure'.
- 34 For details, see Ó Coileáin, 'Oral or Literary?' Delargy, too, argues that the literary sagas of the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries are tale summaries, 'containing all the essential framework and detail which the *sgélaige* [story-teller] expanded when reciting the tales to an audience': 'Gaelic story-teller', 206. Murphy, 'Saga and myth', pp. 98–9 on the other hand, argues that the style of the early Irish tales is a reflection of the problems that arise in the process of transcribing oral performances, and adds: 'several of the best manuscript texts begin well, but tail off badly as the story proceeds. This strange procedure can be easily explained on the hypothesis of recording from oral recitation'. Note that the most important of the tasks, the hunting of the *twrch trwyth* (the wild boar), is mentioned in the *Historia Brittonum*: *Nennius*, ed. Morris, pp. 42, 83 (c. 73).
- 35 Bauman, *Verbal Art*, p. 21. See also Nicolaisen, 'Time in folk-narrative'.
- 36 In Turkic tradition, the *Köroglu* epic is told as several independent plots, each called a *kol* (arm); the term for a comparable unit in medieval Icelandic sagas was *þátr* (strand, of a rope). One cannot help noticing the semantic similarity between the terms *cainc*, *kol* and *þátr*.
- 37 R. M. M. Davies, 'Moral structure', pp. 65–114.
- 38 Matchak, 'Aspects of structure', p. 113.
- 39 Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, p. 55, suggest that the syntactic simplicity of such a paratactic structure 'made it an appropriate vehicle for oral poetry. The poet could concentrate on generating a succession of images, which he endea-

- voured to render brilliant and striking, without having to embed these images in a syntax which articulated logical and causal relations.'
- 40 Hunter, 'Onomastic lore'.
- 41 See Edgar M. Slotkin's excellent analysis, 'Fabula, story, and text'. Radner, 'Interpreting irony', argues that the author of *Culhwch and Olwen*, too, is playing with traditional forms, and that his treatment of oral tradition may well be a consequence of the act of writing itself.
- 42 Chaytor, *From Script*, p. 58.
- 43 See, for example, Eggers, *Symmetrie*, and Zumthor, *Histoire littéraire*.
- 44 Ryding, *Structure*, p. 32.
- 45 J. Gwenogvryn Evans's facsimile edition (*White Book Mabinogion*) is used here when calculating the length of each tale and its divisions.
- 46 Roberts, *Studies on Middle Welsh Literature*, p. 92. However, as was suggested above, the reader may well have expanded parts of the text during an oral delivery.
- 47 For a discussion of tripartism in *Owein*, and of the similarities between the tale and the European *volksmärchen*, see Hunt, 'Art of Iarlles y Ffynnwawn'.
- 48 Nicolaisen, 'Concepts of time', p. 154.
- 49 See, for example, Mac Cana, 'Mongán Mac Fiachna'.
- 50 See, for example, Chafe, 'Integration'.
- 51 Chaytor, *From Script*, p. 142 also draws attention to this feature: 'Medieval literature, written to be recited . . . naturally preserved certain syntactical mannerisms which were eliminated in the course of progress towards literary style. . . . Early language is inclined to avoid subordinate clauses; the elaboration of the Ciceronian period is but little attempted, for the reason that auditors with acoustic, but with no visualising capacity, are likely to lose the thread of a lengthy sentence, unless it is presented to them in co-ordinate clauses.'
- 52 Parry, *Homeric Verse*; Lord, *Singer of Tales*. See also Foley (ed.), *Oral-Formulaic Theory*.
- 53 Bäuml, 'Medieval texts', 39.
- 54 See, for example, Basgöz, 'Formula'; Finnegan, *Oral Literature*; Okpewho, 'Does the epic exist?'; Ross, 'Formulaic composition'; Bruford, *Gaelic Folk-Tales*, and 'Recitation or re-creation?'; and Delargy, 'Gaelic story-teller'.
- 55 For a detailed discussion of formulae in the *Mabinogion*, see S. Davies, *Four Branches*, and *Crefft y Cyfarwydd*.
- 56 Compare the phrases relating to time that function as a boundary marker between episodes within a narrative.
- 57 See Crosby, 'Oral delivery', 100-1.
- 58 *Ystoria de Carolo Magno*, ed. Williams, p. 43.
- 59 Bauman, *Verbal Art*, p. 9.
- 60 See Foley, 'Word-power', and also *idem*, *Singer of Tales*.