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From Traditional Tale to Literary Story

The majority of the tragically few examples of Welsh medieval storytelling which have survived are now known collectively in modern popular usage as *The Mabinogion*. This word, in fact, occurs only once in Middle Welsh and is a scribal error found in a single manuscript. It gained currency after its use by Lady Charlotte Guest to denote the collection of Welsh stories which she translated into English in the years 1838-1849 and which she published in 1849 and 1877. This charming translation (not wholly accurate and occasionally bowdlerized) became known to generations of readers when it was issued in the popular *Everyman's Library* series, with the result that 'The Mabinogion' has become a convenient, though historically unfounded, way of referring to the eleven Middle Welsh prose narratives which remain. Nevertheless, the familiarity of this compendious title should not lead us to view the extant tales as a unified group, and it may be useful to examine the different ways in which and the varying degrees to which they have, as individual compositions, developed from being traditional tales to crafted stories.

Allusions in these stories and in cognate sources testify to an extensive repertoire of oral tales the nature of which ranged from the mythical to the heroic and legendary and which also contained less significant material. Much was lost as the oral tradition weakened and died and the few stories which achieved written form in the medieval period are all that survive complete. They are examples of traditional Welsh narrative and as such they have been analysed and examined to see what they can reveal of Welsh legendary and

mythical tradition, and how they can enrich our understanding of the art of the oral storyteller. They have deepened our appreciation of traditional medieval Welsh culture, but an overemphasis on the sources and the traditional contexts of these stories which stresses purely native elements and which sees them simply as written versions of oral narratives, tends to divorce them from their contemporary literary associations, and to cloud our appreciation of them as the conscious compositions of anonymous but individual authors. They are not to be viewed as written versions of oral stories as recalled by interested amateurs, but more positively as the work of *literati* using and shaping traditional material for their own purposes, whatever those may have been. Their sources are lost, so that it is impossible to specify what changes may have occurred in the passage from oral to written text. It is necessary to distinguish between traditional material and traditional tale, since we cannot even be sure that the tales which we have represent corresponding entities in the oral tradition, or whether our authors have rearranged, conflated, and combined material, in short, have composed (in the sense of *compositio*) new stories. As we shall see, the structures of most of the Mabinogion stories appear to follow common medieval literary modes, while a long, architecturally designed narrative comprising four individual tales, like *The Four Branches*, must raise doubts as to whether the composition ever existed orally in this complete and sequential form, though each part may have existed within a conceptual entity. It has frequently been observed that the oral narrator's relationship to his text is different from that of the author. In the one case we see a performer, a variable text, a knowledgeable audience; stylistically we have a composition based on 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.

Nevertheless, in the early stages of the development of the literary tale the already established conventions of the oral storyteller would have been the

overriding influence on an author's style, and though experience in other types of Welsh writing (e.g. legal) and in Latin and French literature would have provided patterns for structuring and presenting material, the basis of the style of these tales would have been the *cyfarwydd* or oral tradition. The written tales develop their own conventions and the extant stories share common features, so that we may describe these texts as being '*cyfarwydd* style writing', a consciously literary style which never became wholly divorced from the oral tradition which continued to flourish throughout the Middle Ages. It is an essentially narrative style in that sentences are made to flow one into another in a logical and harmonious progression. They are frequently linked by conjunctions, or joining phrases, *a* 'and', *sef a wnaeth* 'this is what he did', so that the reader is conscious of being moved along by the story. Though coordinate clauses or an elementary pattern of adverbial clause and main clause are the most usual, the syntactical pattern of clauses varies so that though the usual verbal tense is preterite or past continuous, writers avoid monotony by using, in addition to the simple verbal form, circumlocutions—verb-noun, e.g. *myned*, + *a wnaeth/a orug* 'go he did', *sef a wnaeth, myned* 'what he did was to go', historical present; in a series of consecutive actions verb-nouns may be used instead of verbs; the word order may be changed from the normal VSO to SVO, OVS. Further inversion may occur in some passages, but these are not normally narrative, and what one is most conscious of is an aesthetic appreciation of the effect of balanced clauses or sentences which contrast with each other. Such smoothness of style is, however, not accidental as it appears to have developed over the years. The oldest of these tales, *Culhwch and Owen*, reveals this polished narrative style in some sections, but its opening paragraphs are almost brutally cryptic as the simple sentences, often containing verb-nouns rather than verbs, lurch from one to another, echoing in their lack of progression the primitive ethos of the social fabric of this story. Part of the interest of *Culhwch and Olwen* is the variety of styles which it employs, ranging from the brief statements of the opening section to a number of examples of typically swiftly moving and smooth narrative, so that the story can be viewed by the critic almost as an archaeologist might examine the layers of his section.

The written stories make use of formulas for restricted functions, e.g. greetings, requests for news, oaths, but they play little or no part in the formation of style. Stories normally open with a phrase naming the hero and giving his status, kingdom etc. That this is a stereotyped opening is suggested by the inverted ('abnormal') syntax of the sentence: within the narrative another phrase ('and one day...') denotes a chapter heading. There are set collocations of noun and adjective, descriptions of dress and appearance, conventional descriptions of combat and phrases denoting the passage of time (e.g. 'and they spent the time in pleasant song...', 'and when it was time to go to sleep, to sleep they went', 'and however long they were on the journey, they came to...'), but within the context of a complete story such phrases do not draw attention to themselves by their frequency and they have a narrow functional role in composition.

The oral origins of 'cyfarwydd style writing' account for the place given to dialogue and for the skill shown in the presentation of convincing conversations or exchanges. *Gereint and Enid* probably reflects the conventions of the oral storyteller most closely in that it contains a higher proportion of dialogue than any other story; much of it, however, is simply pleasantries and courtesies. Conversations tend to be reported fully, rather than reduced to what is significant for the story, whereas the other tales use dialogue meaningfully to reveal situations and to carry the narrative. The author of *The Four Branches* is the most assured of all the writers of the Middle Welsh *chwedlau*. Not only does he use dialogue as a narrative device, but he is able to give his characters recognizably individual forms of expression. He reveals oppositions, points to social distinctions, and paints delightfully naturalistic cameos in the conversations of his characters. Speeches of more than some four or five consecutive sentences are rare, for the author has the ability to see his story unfolding much as a dramatist sees his characters on a stage and situations are not allowed to develop in an unrealistic way. As an example of what I mean, we may turn to an episode in the first of *The Four Branches*. When a former suitor claims Rhiannon on her wedding feast, she draws up an elaborate plan to trick him when he is to return a year hence. All this must be whispered to her husband while the

suitor stands before them awaiting a reply. The author, aware that Rhiannon could never have been allowed to defer her answer so long, makes the suitor interrupt harshly, 'It is high time I have an answer', and thus makes use of his own narrative fault to strengthen the naturally dramatic quality of the scene. If it is correct to see in the confident handling of dialogue by the authors of the written *chwedlau* their debt to the oral storytellers, it is worth noting that *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys*, a tale which contains almost no dialogue or direct speech, did not achieve its written form as an independent literary story deriving directly from oral tradition, but that it has a learned Latin context since it first appears as an insert into Welsh versions of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. The wit and bantering tone of some of the exchanges in the majority of the stories suggest that they were written in a sophisticated setting where wordplay and verbal fencing were agreeable diversions. Where the tales were written is not known, but their urbane tone suggests an aristocratic environment where good conversation and well-told narrative were appreciated. Though the stories do not show the same sophistication or attention to social mores as French romance, they reveal, if not courtly, certainly relaxed and civil attitudes.

Though much of the appeal of these stories lies in the flow of events objectively reported in as lively and logical a way as possible, the action is slowed or enlivened by descriptive passages, brief or extended. These are of two kinds, the one forming part of the narrative flow, the other a rhetorical embellishment. The former follows a familiar technique, that of the TV camera panning and finally centering on the significant object or person. The narrator brings his hero to a castle, a woodland glade, a beach, and progressing through a number of scenic features fixes the gaze upon whatever is central to the episode. The accumulation of details and the delaying of the significant feature is what gives the description force, for on the one hand the scene is presented from the audience's perspective and is shared with them, and on the other the central features or persons become more clearly marked. These features are presented with a judicious choice of significant characteristics which allow both protagonist and reader to become slowly aware of the meaning of what they see together. The result is that though

such descriptions—especially in the hands of the author of *The Four Branches*—need not be obviously adjectival, the eye for detail, both external and in human behaviour, makes them highly realistic.

The other type of descriptive passage takes in a scene in its entirety. Their stereotyped qualities—hair, dress, jewellery, actions—and the fact that similar formalised scenes or descriptions may occur in more than one story, show these to be set-pieces. They arrest the narrative for a moment so that the audience can enjoy the warmth and colour (or the contrasting hideousness) which evoke awe and are appropriate to the marvellous and extravagant. In that sense, though not formalised in structure, these are rhetorical digressions, less consciously so than in French or Latin, but fulfilling a similar function. The device is more highly developed in *Culhwch and Olwen*, which has two extended descriptions which are consciously rhetorical, and both of which fulfil a structural role. The description of Olwen's dress and torque is simple enough though colourful, but her person is described more fully than is usual in Welsh. Each sentence contains a conventional colour-comparison and there is a pattern of variation in the syntactical order of the comparisons. These comparisons conclude the description which is followed by a statement of the effect of the heroine's beauty, obviously intended as a formal closing sentence.

She was sent for. And she came, with a robe of flame-red silk about her, and a torque of red gold around the maiden's neck with precious pearls thereon and rubies.

Yellower was her head than the flower of the broom; whiter was her flesh than the foam of the wave; whiter were her palms and her fingers than the shoots of the marsh trefoil from amidst the fine gravel of a welling spring.

Neither the eye of the mewed hawk, nor the eye of the thrice-mewed falcon, not an eye was there fairer than hers.

Than the breast of the white swan were whiter her breasts.

Redder were her cheeks than the reddest foxgloves.

Whoso beheld her would be filled with love of her. Four white trefoils sprang up behind her wherever she went; and for that reason was she called Olwen.

The description of Culhwch has a similar purpose but is differently organized. It is a traditional portrait of the hero setting out on his adventure—armed, lavishly equipped, mounted, his hounds eager but he himself motionless. Horse and equipment are named at the beginning of each sentence but they are followed by extended descriptions which bring them vividly before us. Here, however, words not only convey an impression of wealth and colour but they are themselves used in a rhetorical pattern. Nouns have two or more adjectives; *gorwydd* 'steed,' has four compound adjectives, each with the same rhythm of a central stressed syllable flanked by unstressed syllables, *penllùchlwyd*, *pedwargâf*, *gauylgygwng*, *carngrâgen*. This oral stylistic device is used throughout the Middle Welsh narrative tradition, not in extended paragraphs as in *Culhwch and Olwen*, but as isolated descriptive phrases where a noun may be accompanied by two or more compound adjectives (or a verb by like adverbs) made up of a monosyllabic and a disyllabic (or even trisyllabic) word which has the same rhythm as the Culhwch passage. Welsh forms compounds easily and some compound adjectives are part of the normal lexicon, but these examples have been especially created, a facility possibly learned in the bardic schools as similar examples are found in more than one prose text and in the poetry. The description of Culhwch is a well-designed paragraph and its function both as a rhetorical digression and as a structural marker (for which see below) is easily recognizable. Under what circumstances an author may decide to use a flourish of adjectives with a single noun is not so obvious, but they occur in *Peredur* and *Gereint* to denote energetic, highly charged movement and emotion, especially therefore with reference to horses, knights, squires, in descriptions of combats, physical or verbal. *The Dream of Rhonabwy* uses the technique of descriptive digression to a greater extent than any other tale. The author writes vivid but traditional flowing prose, but the central part of his story describes two groups of three messengers who are portrayed in a series of permutations of colours and comparisons, with the result that the digression has become an end in itself and effectively stops the narrative.

Whether or not this digression is seen as a 'fault' depends on our willingness to perceive it as one of several satirical and parodic elements in this story which now appears to be more complex in intention than was formerly assumed. The incoherence and inconsequentiality of the central section are intended to reflect an unstructured dream-world, but the paradoxical elements and reversal of roles which appear here surely have satirical significance. The narrative structure of the tale may itself be a parody (as is suggested below), and as we shall see, the author has woven into his tale comments critical of contemporary society while the setting of the story in a particular and carefully specified locale may have had comic meanings for the first audience.

Culhwch and Olwen has another extended rhetorical passage, again in a conventional situation—the porter's report of the hero at the gate. The porter lists the many and exotic regions of the world where he and Arthur have been, the fine men whom he has seen, but none can be compared to the young man at the gate. Some of the place-names have a geographical location, though here viewed conceptually, others are legendary, others simply euphonious, but in series and introduced by the repeated phrase 'I have been...' they are used here to convey the inexpressibility of the hero's stature.

These narratives never include an address to the audience and the narrator does not interrupt his tale nor does he point to the significance of his story. There are, however, a few examples of authorial comment, though some may be scribal glosses. None is long enough to be termed a digression; they are more in the nature of asides which an oral storyteller will make to his audience and thus represent the narrator's comment rather than an author's intrusion. These may be remarks on characters (as in the catalogue in *Culhwch and Olwen*, or on Maxen in *The Dream*), references to inconsistencies within the text or to a variant tradition (e.g. that the hounds noted by the giant in *Culhwch and Olwen* were not the ones which took part in the hunt) or more frequently explanations of place-names, proverbs, or social customs and games. Both *Gereint* and *Owein* have comments on the office of porter to Arthur (the former in some detail). These stand outside the narrative and are directed at the audience though the reason for them may be

that the role of Arthur's porter was the subject of conflicting traditions. We come closer to authorial intervention in the sententious comment at the opening of *Peredur* where it is said of the hero's father, 'And as often is the case with those who follow arms, he and his six sons were killed', an overt criticism of knightly pursuits and tournaments. The narrator's comments in *The Dream of Rhonabwy* are of a different kind, for here, within the dream section, use is made of the technique of the omniscient guide who answers the hero's naive questions about what and whom he sees around him. As this information is critical or satirical, these are in reality authorial comments on his own society and its failings which are part of the meaning of the story. In a word, the author is playing here the role of a narrator persona.

Though there is no direct address to the audience in these stories, the authors are always aware of their readers or listeners and write from their narrative perspective. In *The Dream of Maxen* both emperor and audience acquire knowledge of the dream-maiden's identity at the same time as the author delays revealing it as long as possible to heighten our expectations. Normally, however, though the audience will know where the hero is or under what guise he appears, he is portrayed within the bounds of the knowledge which the other characters have. Thus when Pwyll in the guise of Arawn fights with Hafgan in the first of *The Four Branches*, he is not named in the account of the combat, being identified simply, as 'the man who was in Arawn's place'. This is clearly an unsophisticated attempt to square the audience's knowledge with Hafgan's assumptions. A more controlled example of the description of the hidden identity of a character occurs in *Owein*. Arthur and his men search for the lost hero, who remains unnamed until, during his fight with Gwalchmai, the visor of the latter's helmet is dislodged and he recognises his friend: 'Gwalchmai!' he cries, as his knowledge and ours merge. The author of *Gereint* uses the watchman device to describe Eder's arrival at Arthur's court so that the unknown knight might be slowly recognised, but in both *Peredur* and *Owein* the motif of the all-conquering chivalric unknown is used more ironically.

There can be no doubt that the crisp, brisk style found in all these Middle Welsh tales is to be viewed as one element in the passage from an oral

to a literary medium. Descriptive passages are suggestive rather than detailed, and in spite of some carefully controlled rhetorical sections there is in general a restrained tone to the writing, seen at its most economical in *The Four Branches*. The restraint never lapses into curtness and the Welsh 'cyfarwydd style writing' is more obviously designed to bring pleasure to readers than, for example, the more staccato style of the early Irish prose tales. *The Dream of Maxen* and *Owein* come closest to the norm, and, as the same style is found in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century prose translations and adaptations of Old French narratives, we can conclude that the literary tradition must have been as strong then as it had been a century earlier.

The 'cyfarwydd style' was, however, a developing tradition, and within these stories there are a number of examples where individual authors have freed themselves from oral conventions. In both *Gereint* and *The Four Branches* the use of *uchod* 'above' to refer to a previous incident, where oral style would require a temporal reference, 'before', is a sign of a written text. More instructive is to observe how the conventional opening formula has evolved in these written *chwedlau*. As has already been said, the formulaic tale opening had as its primary purpose the presenting of the hero's name and status ('X was king of /ruling at...'), and in most cases the story follows without any further introduction or explanation. *Owein* and *Peredur*, however, though making use of the formula, delay the narration of the story by including a leisurely description of the scene at court (*Owein*) or of events which preceded the circumstances in which the story is to happen (*Peredur*). The formula in these examples has obviously lost the function which it originally had, and the oral storyteller's need to open his tale directly and catch the attention of his audience immediately is not apparent. *Gereint* retains some of the formula, but the author recognizes it has no role to play and attempts to use it simply as an opening statement which can be developed. His story opens, 'Arthur used to keep court at Caerlion-upon-Usk...' but what follows is a description of the court and an account of its customs, none of which is strictly relevant to the story which is to be told. We have moved from what was an oral storytelling device to a literary convention. *Owein* shows the ultimate development, for although the story opens with the traditional formula, Cynon's tale-within-a-

tale has a wholly nontraditional opening which dispenses with the conventions: 'I was my mother and father's only son, and I was high-spirited and very arrogant.'

The third of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* has another nontraditional opening which marks its written setting even more firmly: 'After the seven men we spoke about above had buried Bendigeidfran's head facing France in the Gwynfryn in London, Manawydan looked upon the town of London and upon his companions and gave a great sigh...' We may note also that *Lludd and Llefelys*, already observed as being somewhat removed from the oral tradition, lacks the formulaic opening phrase.

Owein has other examples of extending the bounds of conventional narrative devices. The author uses the passage of time formula not as an empty phrase, but as a means of conveying the hero's impatience as he awaits the next day's adventure. Taking the device of threefold repetition, a familiar method of increasing tension, (e.g., the three visits to the giant's court in *Culhwch and Olwen*, Peredur's infatuation for the empress, his three-day tournament with the earl's men, Pwyll's meeting with Rhiannon), the *Owein* author integrates it into the account of the Black Knight's final hours—his death pains, the sacrament of extreme unction and his demise.

The triple repetition of incidents may be integral to the structure of the narrative. It may be brought about unimaginatively as in *Lludd and Llefelys* where the three accounts of the defeat of the Coraniaid, though differently motivated, nevertheless reveal a monotonous similarity. The author of *The Dream of Maxen* shows greater skill in handling this device as the three journeys to Britain serve to move the story from a dream world through a geographical setting to an historical period, while the three accounts of the expedition to the fountain in *Owein* have subtle variations in tempo, detail, and purpose which help the development of the narrative.

All the Middle Welsh stories which we are discussing are carefully constructed. All have moved away from the chronological sequence and the single motivation of the folktale or from other simple patterns, as, for example, cumulative or frame stories, so that there can be no doubt as to their status as literary composed tales. *Culhwch and Olwen*, often claimed to be

closest in style to the oral tales, superficially has the simple folklore structure of the hero's gathering up of helpers to fulfil the tasks with which the giant has burdened him; the tasks set become the motivation for a number of independent adventures. In fact, not only does this story have a variety of styles, but its structure is carefully organised into formally distinct parts. The stage is set and the quest theme is stated in the opening paragraphs of part one in the fractured style I described earlier. Part two begins with a rhetorical passage (the setting out of the hero), and the heroic ethos is sustained on his arrival at Arthur's court by the porter's speech. A ritualistic formula (*nod a nottych*, 'name what you will') reiterates the quest, and a catalogue of names with a formal closing sentence ends the section. The search for the heroine, related with some humour in normal narrative style, follows. Her discovery (opening part four) is marked by the second rhetorical passage and the quest theme reappears, again ritualistically, *nod a nottych*, in a catalogue of tasks put into formulaic dialogue form which has a formal closing sentence. The location of the two catalogues at the end of sections two and four is significant as both of these sections open with extended rhetorical passages, and both mark major incidents in the narrative—Culhwch's request at Arthur's court following the introductory section one, and his request at the giant's court following the search for Olwen, section three. The fulfilment tales follow, the narration of which may be swift or leisurely, full or skeletal, single or repeated. Though related to the central theme by their link with the list of tasks imposed by the giant, these tales tend to have an independent existence, and the increasing pace of the story creates a sensation that the tale is disintegrating. The hunting of the boar Twrch Trwyth reimposes order and sets the narration on its feet again. This is a wholly self-contained episode with its own introduction and development which follows an epic pattern of parleys and conditions. The minor characters are killed off in preliminary skirmishes, and only the two protagonists, Arthur and Twrch Trwyth, remain. The hunt rises to its climax and becomes exuberant, exultantly physical. An element of farce releases the tension of the closing stages and the cruel humour of the final episode with its new vocabulary of a lower social register changes the tone of the narrative, bringing it back to the normality of earthy existence. The

vivacity of the narrative, the nature of its material, its inconsistencies and blind alleys, should not blind us to its formal structure and its logical ordering of elements, nor to the implications which these features have for a view of *Culhwch and Olwen*, in its present form, as an oral tale.

The other Middle Welsh stories are structured with similar care. They have an internal logic of episodes, and they have a similar tripartite pattern of two related sections joined by a bridging or interposed section. *Owein* has (a¹) the journey and adventure at the fountain, which is brought to a conclusion in (a²) the account of the hero's rehabilitation; (b) Arthur's search for Owain and the latter's seven-year sojourn at court, links the two main sections which carry the thematic development of the romance. (a¹) is mirrored in (a²), and (b) is relevant to both. *Peredur*, however, has (a¹), the hero's education and chivalric development, while (a²) continues and completes adventures begun in the earlier section: (b) contains independent tales about the hero which do not seem relevant to the thematic development of the romance. The same pattern is found in *The Dream of Maxen*. The story of the dream maiden (a¹) is the prologue to the historically significant role of the hero which appears in (a²), the account of the winning of Rome and the settlement of Brittany: between these two sections comes (b), which contains antiquarian material relevant to the historical theme. *Gereint* has a similar pattern. The story of the winning of Enid is followed by a section which describes the return to Cornwall and life at court, but this is merely the bridge which introduces the deeper theme of the estrangement and reconciliation of the hero and his wife. Arthur's court provides a degree of articulation, but there is no narrative link between the two parts which have different narrative patterns, the prologue ('winning') showing interlace (as do parts of *Peredur*), the second ('reconciliation') section being more straightforwardly linear. The basically binary structure seen in all these tales is a well-known medieval method of ordering a narrative, and its use in these Welsh stories suggests that their authors were aware of contemporary literary practices.

As has already been suggested, this is even more manifest in *The Dream of Rhonabwy*, which has been criticised for its lack of progression, its descriptive passages, and the inconsequentiality of its episodes. There now

seems to be general agreement that these faults are intentional and that the story (an *ystoria* read from a book) is a pastiche of traditional episodes composed as a parody of interlacing and of the episodic style of a *roman d'aventure*. Episodes open, develop and are left, never to be returned to, narrative lines peter out, so that though there is much movement, nothing is ever concluded, and much remains unexplained.

However faithfully these stories may reflect their sources in traditional *cyfarwyddyd*, they reveal themselves to be the literary creations of individual authors who were indebted to the oral tradition for the basis of their style and material, but who drew on contemporary literary theory for their presentation. Careful structuring implies thematic development, and another sign of the literariness of these stories is that the narrative is given significance beyond the progression to a satisfying conclusion of a sequence of events. The significance may, of course, be traditional. The hero of *The Dream of Maxen* was an important figure in British traditional history, but the bringing together of the two themes of his marriage to a British queen and his establishment of Brittany underlines his role in that tradition. Even as fantastic a tale as *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* appears first in Welsh versions of Geoffrey's *Historia*. But in the case of *Owein*, *Gereint*, and *Peredur* the *sens* reflects questions of chivalric modes of behaviour and knightly virtues, and it is the concern for correct standards in a courtly Arthurian society, expressed by means of a narrative of a knight's adventures, which justifies the use of the term 'romance' to describe them.