

‘Introduction to Celtic Literatures’ – Lecture 1a

Hello, and welcome to the ‘Introduction to Celtic Literatures’ module. My name is Jenny Day and I will be your tutor for the first half of the module, which deals with mainly medieval material, also considering the changes that took place at the time of the Reformation. The second half of the module, on the later literature, is taught by Professor Mary-Ann Constantine.

This module will give an overview of what is a very wide field. It will cover the broad outlines showing what literature exists, what the main types are and how they relate to one another. It will provide a framework, helping you to orientate yourself, to get your bearings within the field. We won’t be able to cover every aspect in detail, of course, and indeed there are other modules you’ll be able to choose later, that will cover more specialised areas. But hopefully this module will help you decide which areas you’d like to pursue.

It will also focus on some key texts or topics, which have been chosen to highlight what is interesting and attractive about Celtic literatures, what is special about them, in order to whet your appetite, as it were, for work at the next level.

In this first lecture we’ll take an overview of chronology, and some types and genres of literature, and also consider some general questions of the authorship and purpose of literature. In the second half of the lecture, which I’ve recorded separately, we’ll have a look at some examples of Welsh and Irish lyric poetry, specifically those where the natural world features strongly. This kind of poetry, in terms of its sensibility and self-expression is perhaps closest to what we might generally expect of poetry today.

The next lecture considers heroic poetry and also introduces the heroic ideal, which pervaded early literatures – not only Celtic ones – and early societies more generally. In the third lecture we move on to consider prose, comparing and contrasting two of the great cycles of Welsh and Irish literature, namely the Four Branches of the Mabinogi and *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. These will provide an opportunity to discuss a variety of themes including the heroic ideal, the role of women, and depictions of magic and the Otherworld.

The fourth lecture moves on to the later middle ages and considers the works of the fourteenth-century poet Dafydd ap Gwilym, who is generally considered to be the greatest of the poets of medieval Wales. In the fifth lecture, we consider the changes that took place in Welsh literature and culture at the time of the Renaissance, leading in to the second part of the course that’s taught by Mary-Ann.

I should say something about the ‘Celtic’ element in the title of this module. This term is used here mainly in the linguistic sense, that is literature composed in one of the Celtic languages. Of course, the Celtic languages are not equal in terms of the amount of literature that exists in each of them. For the early period that I’m dealing with, the literatures of Ireland and Wales are the best-represented by far, and I’ll be focussing on these. You will notice, too, that there is a bias towards Wales in the material I’m covering. This reflects the fact that my own expertise is in the area of Welsh literature. However, the reading list contains a variety of primary and secondary sources that will hopefully help you to explore the wealth of early literature in both languages.

Moving on to the literature itself (slide 2), one question that arises is, is there anything that characterises literature as ‘Celtic’, aside from the issue of language? Here are some key features that you might find discussed in that context in the secondary literature:

- Attention to the natural world
- Sense of place, landscape
- Supernatural elements and the ‘Otherworld’
- Imagination, vivid description
- Rhetoric, elaborate language, importance of sound and musicality in poetry
- Prominent social function of poet and storyteller: literature was more than just entertainment, it contributed to the well-being of society as a whole.

These features, however, do not *define* ‘Celtic’ literature, and neither are they confined to ‘Celtic’ literature. You can form your own conclusions about whether there *is* such a thing as ‘Celtic literature’, from a wider cultural as opposed to linguistic perspective. But you’ll notice that in our module title we’ve used the plural, ‘Celtic literatures’, which seems safest.

Moving on to chronology.... (slide 3), on Moodle you’ll find a pdf entitled ‘chronological framework’ which provides basic information on the broad historical background up to the modern period, focusing mainly on Wales. You may find it useful as a means of placing the literature you will be studying within its historical period, and it might be a good exercise for you to try to fit the various works we’ll be discussing into the appropriate slot in this framework.

So for instance, the Welsh heroic poetry which I’ll be talking about next week relates – ostensibly, at least – to the Anglo-Saxon invasions in the Post-Roman period.

A few points to note:

Most of the events in the left-hand column are invasions / conquests or the consequences thereof, from the Romans onwards, and it is interesting to think about the cultural influence that these had. So for instance it could be said that the so-called ‘twelfth-century Renaissance’ affected Wales as a result of the Norman Conquest.

Religion is another important aspect, from the coming of Christianity through to the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

The Age of the Saints, which is noted in the Post-Roman period, is the time when the Celtic saints, such as David and Patrick, are supposed to have lived. Most of the texts that tell the stories of saints’ Lives are of much later date – Saint David’s, for example, dates from the late eleventh century. By contrast, Saint Patrick’s own writings do survive.

The terms Middle Ages and Medieval refer to a period between classical antiquity and modern times. It begins roughly with the fall of the Roman Empire and ends with the Renaissance, and it can be divided into early, high and late. You may also come across the term Dark-age, which roughly corresponds to the Early Medieval period. The term ‘Dark Ages’ has fallen out of favour somewhat because of its negative connotations, implying a barbaric period, which is not really appropriate. However, it is useful in conveying the idea of a period about which we know relatively little, because of a lack of historical sources.

Let's turn to the question of literary types and genres now (slide 4). There is a factsheet on this on Moodle too, which illustrates a general categorisation between prose and poetry, and then between basic types of poetry.

It's worth noting to begin with that the use of prose to recite stories from an early period is a characteristic of Celtic literature – in contrast to other European literatures which mainly used poetry, such as the epic poems of Homer and Virgil, and Arthurian romances in French and German.

Prose compositions would originally have been recited from memory by professional storytellers. Anonymity is also a typical feature, of prose especially, because these stories were not the work of a single author, but were re-told, re-composed from generation to generation. Storytellers depended on memory for the content. They were helped in this by the frequent use of recurring phrases or formulae, and by narrative techniques such as threefold repetition. But even so, a story could have changed with each telling.

In prose we often find cycles of inter-related tales – events in the life of a hero such as Cuchulainn or Arthur.

This is where we see most of the supernatural content which is typical of early Celtic literature, wonders and marvels, perhaps originally dealing with divine figures.

The plots use common folktale motifs such as taboos, love-sickness, the quest, or the wronged and slandered wife. Another common feature are so-called onomastic stories, providing explanations for place-names and landscape features.

In a wider, European context, the Welsh prose tradition was extremely influential – most obviously through the Arthurian cycle, popularised by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his Latin work *Historia Regum Britanniae*. This work purports to be a history but is better regarded as historical narrative. There are many other kinds of Welsh and Irish prose, of course, including chronicles, genealogy, legal texts, and religious texts such as saints' Lives. But we can't cover everything, so we'll focus on what are regarded as two of the great works of Irish and Welsh literature, namely the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and the Four Branches of the Mabinogi. These include a variety of contrasting themes that we'll explore, and they also have the advantage that there are excellent translations available.

Moving on to poetry (slide 5), the most prominent genre by far is praise poetry or heroic poetry. These terms aren't exactly synonymous. They both refer to poetry which typically praises the military prowess of male subjects, expressing the 'heroic ideal', which was all about courage in battle, and a desire to win everlasting fame through brave deeds. The term 'heroic poetry' tends to be used of the early poems whose date and historical context is controversial, such as those attributed to Aneirin and Taliesin. 'Praise poetry', by contrast, is more often used of poetry that can be more securely associated with known poets and patrons, such as the twelfth- and thirteenth-century 'Poets of the Princes' or the later 'Poets of the Gentry'. We do often find the heroic ideal in these poems but it's not expressed in such a strong or undiluted way.

Poems were composed according to strict metrical rules by professional court poets and recited to musical accompaniment on ceremonial occasions. This category includes what is perhaps the earliest surviving literature in Welsh, dated by some scholars to around the year

600, and the tradition continues strongly until the end of the Middle Ages and indeed beyond, as it also does in Irish Bardic poetry.

This was the backbone of the poetic tradition in Wales and Ireland, with professional poets being employed by noble patrons to prove their social status – essentially, acting as publicity agents or spin doctors.

Within the broad genre of praise-poetry are a variety of sub-genres, including praise-poems addressed to churchmen, who, of course, are praised for attributes such as piety and learning, rather than prowess on the battlefield. There are also poems in praise of female patrons, who might be the wives or sometimes the daughters of male patrons. These are not the same as love poems, though there might be a certain amount of overlap between the two categories.

Some poems addressed to saints and to the Almighty also share features with secular praise poetry. And conversely, secular praise poems might contain religious elements, in calling upon God to provide a suitable muse to praise a patron, or to receive him into heaven after death.

Turning to lyric poetry (slide 6), which is more a broader ‘type’ than a genre, the defining feature is a focus on personal feelings and experience, usually expressed in the first person or a dramatic persona. It deals with responses to the natural world, religion, love and personal loss, among other things. This is often the most appealing poetry for modern readers.

Some of the anonymous, early lyrics are spoken in a female voice, and might be by female poets, but it is not possible to prove that. We have to be careful to distinguish between the poet and the persona, or ‘mask’, that they wear. It may be that it was a male poet who composed Heledd’s lament, spoken in the first person, for her brother Cynddylan in an early Welsh poem, and likewise in the case of the Irish poem spoken by the Old Woman of Beare lamenting the loss of her youth.

We’ll look at some examples of lyric poetry in the second half of this week’s lecture, but before leaving this overview of types and genres (slide 7) I need to emphasize that the categories within poetry – and indeed the distinction between poetry and prose – are not absolute or clear-cut. The cycle of poems concerning Heledd and Cynddylan can also be described as **saga poetry**, since it is thought to form part of a wider narrative tradition. That is, the poems were the one surviving part of a saga whose ‘gaps’, from our perspective, may have been filled in with prose, by storytellers. Irish sagas were often expressed as a combination of prose and poetry, known as **prosimetrum**. Indeed, even in the Four Branches of the Mabinogion poetry occurs here and there, as we’ll discuss in week three.

Religious poems are often considered a genre in themselves. There are other genres, too, that are beyond the scope of this introductory module, including **prophetic poetry**, **poems of reconciliation** and **poems of request and thanks**, as well as satires.

Lastly for this half of the lecture, I want to say a bit about authors (slide 8) and authorship, and the purpose of texts.

Some poems of course are anonymous, so all we have to go on as to their authorship is their content, and perhaps the manuscript context where they occur. So for example if we found a poem scribbled in the margin of a religious text which we know was written at a particular monastery, we might say that it was probably written by a monk and a scribe. Assuming, that

is, that the handwriting of the poem dated from a similar period to the rest of the text on the page. The contents of a poem might also suggest that the writer was a monk or priest, or that he or she had a certain type of education. And of course there might be allusions to people or events that would help us with dating, though such things have to be weighed carefully.

Often, we do have an attribution to a particular poet, either in the form of a reference within the text or, more often, recorded in a title or note given at the beginning of the poem, or in a note at the end of the poem. ‘So-and-so sang this’, is a common formula in Welsh. The ‘Gododdin’, for example, which we’ll discuss next week, begins with the phrase *Hwn yw e gododin, Aneirin a’e cant*. Such attributions can’t always be taken at face value, but need to be considered critically in the light of other factors, such as what the poem’s language may suggest about its likely date, and how well its content in a more general sense seems to fit in with what we know of the history, politics and society of the era when the poet named in the attribution is supposed to have lived.

In the case of Aneirin and Taliesin, who supposedly lived in the sixth century, whether any of the poetry ascribed to them or delivered in their voice was actually composed by them has been a matter of much scholarly debate. However, importantly, it *does* appear that they were regarded as historical poets later in the middle ages. There is evidence for this in (slide 9) ‘The Memorandum of the Five Poets’, which occurs among the north British material in the 9th-century *Historia Brittonum*. In fact we have mention of five poets, not only Aneirin and Taliesin but also Talhaearn Tad Awen, his epithet meaning ‘father of poetic inspiration’, Blwchfardd, and a prophetic poet called Cian. And the references to the two kings, Ida of Anglian Bernicia or Brynaich, and Maelgwn, of the north Wales kingdom of Gwynedd, locates them all in the sixth century.

We’ll discuss Aneirin and Taliesin more in the next lecture, but for now – going back to the earlier slide (slide 10) – I just want to emphasize that the authorship of the texts we’ll be studying is often unknown, or controversial.

Attributions are usually considered relatively ‘safe’ where they are to known, historical poets praising well-known and well-attested patrons, for example, the 12th and 13th century Poets of the Princes.

But there can be deliberate forgeries. In the case of the fourteenth-century poet Dafydd ap Gwilym, his fame and reputation as a great love-poet led to many later poems being wrongly attributed to him. And indeed some were deliberately faked, by the later poet and antiquary Edward Williams, better known as Iolo Morganwg.

On rare occasions we might find what is known as an ‘autograph’ copy of a poem, that is, one that has actually been written in the manuscript by its author. A poem by Dafydd ap Gwilym in what is known as the Hendregadredd Manuscript is one likely instance. We’ll discuss this in more detail in week 5. And we have autograph copies of poems by a few fifteenth-century poets such as Lewys Glyn Cothi. Often, though, a poem will have reached us only after being transmitted through several stages of copying, and it might indeed have been transmitted orally for a long time prior to first being written down.

This is true of prose as well. And indeed, there are many cases where the concept of authorship isn’t really appropriate at all. Prose texts are often regarded as having developed over time with contributions from many storytellers. And this could happen with poetry too.

For example, prophetic poems attributed to Merlin or Taliesin evolved over time in response to changing historical circumstances. I'm studying these at the moment, in fact, as part of the 'Poetry of Merlin' research project.

Above all, we need to keep in mind that the person who actually composed the poem (slide 11) may have taken on another persona, that is, they are not speaking in their own normal voice. The difference between poet and persona may be relatively minor. Dafydd ap Gwilym, for example, composed different poems as different versions of himself – sometimes he is the ardent, adulterous lover, scorning the conventions of society, sometimes the cultured companion of a noble patron such as Ifor Hael, sometimes the clownish butt of his own wit. In other cases the gulf between poet and persona may have been enormous – the young Heledd's lament for her brother may have been composed by an aged male poet, and the old woman of Beare's lament for her lost youth might have been the work of a young one.

Another thing to think about (slide 12) is what the poet's status may have been. Was he a permanent part of a patron's retinue, like the household bards of Welsh kings and princes, or did he seek patronage from a variety of different patrons like the later poets of the gentry? Either one would be regarded as a professional poet. Some princes or noblemen were poets themselves, and churchmen and monks might also be poets. In the case of Wales we do have at least one female poet, Gwerful Mechain, who lived in the fifteenth century. And there could have been others whose names went unrecorded, of course.

Importantly, a professional poet would need to please his patron. Though some of them were brave enough to criticise their patrons, too.

And this brings us (slide 13) to the purpose of the poem. We rarely know for sure, but this is still an important point to consider in approaching any literary text.

Firstly, was the poem the product of what we might call a pure creative impulse, written to express the poet's feelings or in response to the world around him? Such poems may be very personal and linked to a fleeting moment of time; but they may also have something universal to say about the world or the human condition.

Secondly, a poem can be, or contain, a prayer to God, or a meditation on His nature. Or it might be meant to inspire others for a religious, devotional purpose.

Poems, and prose tales, might also be intended as educational or edifying; perhaps passing on old traditions, or providing models for how people were expected to behave, or reinforcing the social contract between a ruler and his people.

The social contract idea is also key to praise poetry. These poems are all about justifying and promoting the lord's right to rule – in a sense they're political propaganda. Commemoration was also an important part of the professional poets' role, especially in the case of elegies for patrons who had died, but also for particular events such as a victory in battle.

In those respects, poems were about maintaining the *status quo*. But they could also invite change. Prophetic poems, for example, ostensibly foreseeing the coming of a National Redeemer, often had a specific political purpose and were in fact designed to focus support and help bring about the future they claimed to predict. The poetry composed in the run-up to Henry Tudor's reign is a fine example of this.

A poem might also set out a personal grievance, or seek to heal a breach between poet and patron – these reconciliation poems form a special sub-genre known as *dadolwch*. Some satirical poems too might be composed in response to specific circumstances. The fifteenth-century poet Gutun Owain, for example, complained that some fellow-poets had stolen a book of his. Other satires though, especially those exchanged between poets, are probably better regarded as expressions of rivalry performed as entertainment, like modern day ‘battle rap’.

More generally, too, poems and prose were, of course, a major form of entertainment in the Middle Ages. Especially on those long winter nights. Professional storytellers and poets had to make their material entertaining in order to make a living. And many had their particular patrons to please, as well as wider audiences. It’s important to remember that most of the poetry and prose we’re talking about here would have been performed orally.

I hope this introduction has helped give an idea of the scope of the literature we’ll be considering, and offered some ideas for a framework for how it can be viewed and discussed. The second half of this week’s lecture, which I’ve recorded separately, considers some Welsh and Irish examples of lyric poetry. As well as the recording and script for the lectures you’ll also find factsheets on the website and, for each week, a list of what I’ve called ‘suggested activities’. There’s also a general reading list which you aren’t expected to read exhaustively, of course, but it’s aimed to give you scope to help you complete the assignment essay and to pursue those aspects which particularly interest you.

That’s all for now, and see you next time!