

Oral Tradition in Medieval Welsh Poetry: 1100-1600

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Very little research has been done in this field, although there is in fact a rich body of evidence for the oral or memorial transmission of Welsh poetry in the later medieval period. As far as composition is concerned there is no direct evidence of poets' practices, but nevertheless it is generally assumed that they would not have had recourse to writing (the earliest definite holograph texts date from the late fifteenth century, and even those are fair copies of poems composed previously). Since almost all the court poetry of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries has survived in a unique text copied about 1300, the opportunity for study of variance in transmission is limited. The only poem of that period which can be seen to have survived through oral as well as written tradition is Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch's elegy to the last of the princes of Gwynedd that marked the end of Welsh political independence in 1282; two late fifteenth-century versions that differ very substantially from the supposedly authoritative text in the *Red Book of Hergest* can perhaps be explained as a reoralization from memory of that earlier text.

Evidence for oral transmission is much more abundant from the fourteenth century onwards, following the emergence of the popular *cywydd* meter. The poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym and Iolo Goch in particular seem to have been preserved mainly by oral tradition for at least a hundred years, until the mid-fifteenth century. The number of extant versions over the following three centuries is often as many as fifty, and the variants between them show how much the texts of the poems changed due both to faulty memory and to creative recomposition. Oral transmission is proved most conclusively by substantial variations in line order, which are hardly likely to have occurred within a written tradition; other significant features are substitution of synonyms and like-sounding words, and varying attributions. Oral transmission has been seen primarily as an occasional hindrance in the restoration of the original text; only recently has its prevalence been

recognized and interest been taken in its processes for their own sake. Oral tradition will be a key issue in a University of Wales research project on the poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym, running from 2002-6, one of the outcomes of which will be an electronic edition enabling the presentation of variant versions in parallel. The concept of the original text is a difficult issue here, and it may be that some variant readings go back to differing versions composed by the poet himself. Nevertheless, the idea of an authoritative text belonging to a named author does seem to have been meaningful in this tradition, not least because of the highly complex metrical adornments (*cynghanedd*) that preserved a good deal of the text in fixed form. This was highly artistic poetry that was also genuinely popular, transmitted both by professional reciters and poets and by amateurs of the gentry class.

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References

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