

Oral Tradition and Welsh Literature: A Description and Survey

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The earliest Welsh literary tradition was, of necessity, an oral one. Written Welsh, in its extant forms, appears first in marginalia, explanatory notes, and glosses in the eighth century A.D. in an orthography which is obviously derived from Latin. This and similar material, representing the Old Welsh period of the language and found in Latin manuscripts of the eighth to late eleventh centuries, has an ecclesiastical and scholastic context (Jackson 1953:31-75; Evans 1982). The glosses are on familiar texts, there are extended explications of technical treatises on weights and measures and a fragment of a translation of a Latin computus, but records of grants and transfers of lands and gifts, made in accordance with Welsh customary law, serve to remind us that writing in the vernacular was not restricted to non-native, or Latin, matters. The Latin-based orthography of Old Welsh is also used for the earliest records of Cornish and Breton and reflects the interests and needs of a common "Celtic" church attempting to use the vernaculars in a written form not only for technical or book-learning but also for the recording of native oral culture for whatever purpose. Haycock (1981:96) rightly observes that the existence of an orthographic model in Latin which could be adapted to the vernaculars must have considerably facilitated their writing. The measure of literacy in monastic circles coming into contact with forms of native culture is the fountain-head of Welsh written literature. It reveals itself not only in book-learning and snatches of religious poetry but also in a fragment of a speech poem which probably derives from an oral tale (Williams 1933a), though the evidence does not suggest that the contact between the two cultures was as deep or as fruitful as was the case in early Ireland.

Side by side with the Latin book-learning of the “Celtic” church, and subsequently the European Roman church, there existed a tradition of native learning which represented Welsh culture in the broadest sense. The general term for this body of learning was *cyfarwyddyd*, the etymology of which suggests “seeing, perception, guidance, knowledge”; its experts were *cyfarwyddiaid* (sg. *cyfarwydd*), the knowledgeable within the society who could advise and instruct according to custom and tradition. (In Modern Welsh *cyfarwydd* is an adjective, “familiar with”; *cyfarwyddyd* a noun, “directions, instructions.”) That the *cyfarwyddiaid* were recognized, if not as a specific class, certainly as having a perceived function, is suggested by the earliest attestation of the word in a ninth-century grant where the *cimarguitheit* are those who know the details of rent due on a parcel of land (Jenkins and Owen 1983:53-54), while later examples show that the body of knowledge held by *cyfarwyddiaid* was more extensive than legal rights and dues. It was, rather, a complex corpus of traditional lore necessary for society to function (Roberts 1976b; Sims-Williams 1985; Edel 1983), and as such would have included history, genealogies and origin narratives, topography, boundaries and geography, religious myths, tribal and family lore, antiquities and legends, social and legal procedures, and medicine, all of which would have been presented in a variety of forms ranging from panegyric verse to gnomic poetry, catalogues in rhyme, and narratives both verse and prose, all serving as “cultural orientation” (Sims-Williams 1985:101).

The “literary” aspects of *cyfarwyddyd* appear to have been the prerogative of the bards, who together with mediciners and lawyers formed the learned classes in medieval Welsh society (Mac Cana 1970). A bardic triad notes the three features which give a poet amplitude—knowledge of histories, poetry, and heroic verse, and though little is known of the detailed content and organization of bardic education in the medieval period, the bare statement of the triad is given substance in a late medieval treatise, found only in an English version, which describes the three memories (*y tri chof*) of the bards as knowledge of history, language, and genealogies (Bromwich 1974:52). Such knowledge was transmitted in oral narrative forms which audiences came to recognize less as information than entertainment (Edel 1983), as is suggested by the later semantic development of *cyfarwyddyd* in Middle Welsh where it is commonly used for “story, narrative,” and *cyfarwydd* for

“storyteller.” Little is known of the social context or professional organization of storytelling though there is a glimpse in the tale of *Math* which suggests that it was still one of the bardic functions (Mac Cana 1980; Ford 1975-76). The evidence relating to the functions of the analogous Irish *filid* is more clearly attested (Binchy 1961; Murphy 1961; Mac Cana 1980) and here, as indeed in any discussion of the interaction of oral and written narrative in Welsh, one turns to Irish for patterns and more coherent testimonies. Nevertheless, there were significant differences in social developments and extraneous influences between the two countries, and one cannot press the analogies too hard. In the Welsh story which is the last of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, Gwydion seeks entry to the court of another king and achieves his purpose by disguising himself and his entourage as bards. Having warmly welcomed and supped his guests, the king turns to Gwydion:

“We would enjoy a *cyfarwyddyd* (tale) from one of those young men.”

“Our custom, Lord,” said Gwydion, “the first night one comes to a nobleman is that the chief bard should speak. I’ll gladly tell you a tale.”

And Gwydion entertained the court with pleasant tales and storytelling (Jones and Jones 1948:56-57; Williams 1930:68-69). This reference is capable of more than one interpretation, and its context as an episode in a tale of trickery and guile must not be lost sight of, but for the author, it appears, storytelling was one of the roles of the lower grade of poets (or apprentices) and the master-poet would become storyteller only on special occasions or perhaps for certain categories of narrative. Welsh court poetry of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries contains many literary references which reveal the extent of the poets’ familiarity with traditional studies, but they never refer to themselves as storytellers, and while later poets, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, sometimes portray themselves as reading and studying with their patrons, their role seems to be that of genealogist and historian rather than narrator of tales (Rowlands 1985). There is no narrative poetry in Middle Welsh (the ballad tradition is modern), but the poets’ involvement in storytelling may be inferred from a tradition of chant-fable narrative which, it has been suggested, existed in medieval Wales.

There are a number of poems, or fragments of poems, which are dialogues or persona-poems. The latter, for the most part associated with the names of Llywarch Hen and Heledd, and stemming from the Welsh-English conflicts of the ninth to tenth centuries, are lyrics on the themes of heroic behavior, of loneliness and old age, and of desolation, while the former are greetings and catalogues. It has been proposed in a persuasive hypothesis (Williams 1933a and b) that such poems are the speech elements of stories where the emotionally charged episodes, boasts, laments, soliloquies, and dialogues, as well as formal introductory greetings, were recounted in verse, which was copied into manuscripts, while the narrative passages were recited in prose which, being less stable in form and able to be re-created at will, was not given a fixed written form. This explanation of the Welsh speech poems was suggested by a narrative pattern found in Irish in, e.g. the Ulster Cycle of tales, which are in prose interspersed with verses which usually repeat what has already been said in prose. However, these verses appear to be secondary and may be found in more than one prose context so that the Irish pattern is more fluid and not strictly analogous to what has been proposed for the Welsh poems. Some are self-contained poems which require not so much a narrative setting as a traditional context which need not be explicitly stated; others are unintelligible without some form of narrative background, which may nevertheless not have been fixed (Rowland 1985). Taken as a genre, however, these speech poems point to bardic involvement in oral storytelling, though the function of the verse element is less clearly understood than was formerly presumed.

These verses, usually in three- or four-line stanzas termed *englynion*, are of considerable artistry and emotional intensity and cannot be regarded as popular “folk poetry.” Their style, allusions, *topoi*, and metrical forms point to the professional bards as authors, while the progression and structure of many poems reveal them to be discrete compositions. One of their distinctive features is the use of a high degree of repetition of phrase or line where a minimum of variation—often the end-rhyme word—provides for the movement from one stanza to the next. This “incremental repetition” (Jackson 1941) is neither formulaic nor “popular,” and it is better regarded as a controlled compositional feature which the best poets can employ to heighten the emotional impact of a lyric by creating a cumulative effect or by delaying the resolution of

tension. Repetition can, of course, be used unimaginatively and as a mechanical means of composition, and that there are examples of such use in the Welsh *englynion* cannot be denied. Nevertheless, in most cases it seems to be regarded as a stylistic device which was intended to enhance the literary effect of a poem. The poems may also make use of stereotyped epithets or phrases, but these are not metrical features and are intended as allusions and connotations. Welsh bardic poetry, and this is the only kind which has been preserved from the medieval period—though there are different classes, e.g. panegyric, religious, prophetic, persona-poems, antiquarian—seems to have been orally composed, but this does not imply that poems were improvised. The Irish evidence (Ó Coileáin 1978), in broad not specific terms, seems apposite, for Welsh court poetry seems to have been composed in a literary but unwritten way and poems had a fixed form which was memorized. Many of the compositions are metrically intricate and use conventional phrases highly charged in the literary tradition, but they are not formulaic and the poems appear to have retained both their structure and lexis with minimum change. Native Welsh literary tradition appears to have been oral down to the fifteenth century and to have been dependent on bards composing orally and on a class of performers (*datgeiniaid*) declaiming by rote their compositions (Williams 1969:5-7). Religious poetry and learned allusions show that native poets and clerics who had mastered the literary conventions were in contact, sometimes in rivalry, with the Latin book-learning of the Church (Haycock 1981), but the literacy of that shared world seems to have affected very little the adjacent oral world of native court poetry which laid greater stress on memorizing (cf. Lord 1960:134-35). The Gododdin poem, attributed to the sixth-century Aneirin, may have been copied in the ninth century but is now extant in a single manuscript of c. 1250. This copy has been held to represent two early variant forms of an oral “text” which seem to be viewed almost as an oral expression of a manuscript stemma, as though the variants were oral deviations from a standard text (Williams 1938; Jackson 1969). Recent work, some of it as yet unpublished, may show that we should think rather of a continuing oral tradition and that the “textual” tradition of a sixth-century poem did not bifurcate but was constantly being added to by contemporary poets up to the time of its first writing. The poetry attributed to the roughly contemporary poet Taliesin, found in the Book of Taliesin, an early

fourteenth-century manuscript, is in “good textual repair” (Haycock 1981:93), and this fact, equally true of twelfth- and thirteenth-century court poetry, would suggest that while a learned class existed to transmit and control this material, its form could be retained with little variation so that when the poems were given written form there was comparatively little textual corruption. Where variant texts occur, differences can usually be explained as the results of faulty memory reversifying according to the strict rules which govern Welsh prosody. Collections of court poetry were made by monastic scribes for lay patrons in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but though family poetry books had become a recognized way of preserving praise of patrons by the sixteenth century, oral presentation and preservation were probably more common until antiquarian scribes sought to salvage what they could from a declining bardic order. The tradition of classical poetry which uses archaic vocabulary, intricate metrical forms, and strictly controlled patterns of complex alliteration has survived as a living art in modern Wales. The ability to compose poems in traditional style without recourse to pen and paper, to recall phrases, lines, and whole passages of verse, to take part in competitions of extempore composing, is not uncommon. The strength of the tradition is that it “plays against the audience’s memory of poetry” (Fry 1981:282, but in a different context), and the modern participant in or the audience of poetic competitions (a popular weekly radio program) would not have found the composing and memorizing of medieval Welsh bards particularly strange.

Orality, allied to conventional similes, metaphors, allusions, and epithets, can co-exist with fixed forms and memorizing in a culture which nevertheless may live adjacent to a literate book-based society. The result for medieval Welsh literature is that the work of the earliest poets (Aneirin, Taliesin) exist in single manuscripts and the works of the court poets in only two collections, while there are scores of copies of translations of religious and historical works and of the laws. Traditional Welsh literature achieves written form comparatively late, in few manuscripts and in single versions of texts, and it was first recorded, one assumes, by non-practitioners. This last feature may not be of crucial importance in the case of court and learned bardic poetry which had a fixed form, but it is of significance when one considers the body of lore described above.

Cyfarwyddyd as a coherent corpus is now irretrievably lost, but its outlines can be re-created to some degree by recovering those fragments which appear in other contexts or forms (Bromwich 1954). The most comprehensive of these is the Triads of the Island of Britain, a collection of references to mythic, legendary, and heroic lore reduced to its minimum expression and organized as groups of triads under a common description (Bromwich 1961). The collection may have been compiled as a mnemonic index and a method of easy retrieval of information to assist the bards who used names, epithets, and references to adventures as allusions to enrich their praise of patrons, but the collection has strong antiquarian overtones and the arrangement of the material in the White Book version suggests that the editor was more book-man than poet (Hamp 1981-82). Bromwich has observed that the poetic allusions to this material show real familiarity with the narrative tradition up to about the beginning of the thirteenth century but that thereafter the allusions seem to lack a true awareness of the context of names and epithets. The “Stanzas of the Graves” is a collection of versified legend associated with particular sites and localities (Jones 1967). Other evidence of *cyfarwyddyd* (geographical, historical, the Welsh heroic age in particular) can be salvaged from Gildas’ *De Excidio Britanniae*, *Historia Brittonum* (often ascribed to the ninth-century Nennius), Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* and *Vita Merlini*, Gerald of Wales, some *vitae sanctorum*. In these cases the information is transmitted not by its exponents but by secondary authorities who may or may not have been in close contact with *cyfarwyddiaid* and with native culture. These works are being produced for a non-native audience and there is inevitably some degree of interpretation, adaptation, or authorial interference. Each author has to be viewed by his own attitudes. Gildas’ critical response to the retreat of the Romans from Britain was not that of the *cyfarwyddiaid* who used the same event to explain the founding of Brittany, but there is no doubt that “Nennius”’ prophetic view of the ultimate defeat of the white dragon of the Saxons by the red dragon of the Britons derives from and reflects native hopes.

The earliest example of traditional narrative history has been preserved not in Welsh but in the Latin of the *Historia Brittonum*. The writer had barely enough Latin for his needs, and his account of the reception of the Saxons by the love-sick British king Vortigern echoes the phrases and commonplaces of the Welsh

cyfarwyddyd which he retells. The simple narrative probably owes as much to the author's grasp of Latin as to an oral style, but the desire to give names to every character, protagonists or merely functions, the high proportion of dialogue passages and the triple-staged altercation, the explanation of place-names, the appeal to contemporary evidence ("et nusquam apparuerunt *usque in hodiernum diem*, et arx non aedificata est *usque hodie*") (Morris 1980:9), and the conflict of single protagonists all underline the narrative's oral antecedents. It opens with the traditional form of opening statement of extant Welsh prose tales (*Guorthigirnus regnavit in Brittonia*) (Morris 1980:67; Mac Cana 1973:107-9; Watkins 1977-78:394), but the *cyfarwyddyd* is interwoven with an ecclesiastical account of the Life and Miracles of St Germanus. It is the first example of the interplay of Welsh oral tradition with Latin writing (*Hic est finis Guorthigirni, ut in Libro beati Germani repperi. Alii autum aliter dixerunt*) (Morris 1980:47). The story is characteristic of the whole, for part of the value, and danger, of the *Historia Brittonum* is that it is an attempt to fuse the two historical traditions by one who seems not to have appreciated their incongruity.

Geoffrey of Monmouth was a more conscious author, writing in a different period for a different audience. We must believe that he was well aware of what he was doing and that all his sources were adapted and managed for his own purpose. The extent to which he drew on Welsh traditions in the *Historia Regum* is debatable, but it is not likely that any of his extended narratives reflect so faithfully a single Welsh tale as does the *Historia Brittonum*. Nevertheless, there was sufficient evidence here for Welsh readers to recognize their own historical tradition and to claim that there were gaps or inconsistencies which could be rectified in Welsh translations (Roberts 1973). Thus one thirteenth-century translator inserted a complete tale which he obviously felt Geoffrey should not have omitted. Its traditional oral source is made clear in the sentence which the translator added to Geoffrey's opening: "Beli Fawr son of Manogan had three sons, Lludd, Caswallawn, and Nynhiaw. *And according to the cyfarwyddyd Llefelys was a fourth son*" (Roberts 1975:1). *Cyfarwyddyd* here is the traditional tale of Lludd and his brother Llefelys which the translator inserts into his translation of the *Historia*, but although it had an existence as an oral narrative, as some independent references confirm, it is retold here not by a

cyfarwydd but by a monastic translator and thus although being in Welsh, it is, like “Nennius” Latin story of Vortigern, one stage removed from its proper context, and is the work not of a performer but an auditor in another literary tradition. The Tale of Lludd and Llefelys subsequently appears as an independent story, *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* (*The Encounter of Lludd and Llefelys*) in the two manuscripts which contain copies of those prose tales usually referred to in modern usage as *Mabinogion* (Roberts 1975; Jones and Jones 1948), but this “Mabinogion” version is not parallel to the “historia” version but a development of it. The existing oral *cyfarwyddyd* was not given written form, but the version found in the Welsh “Historia” worked up and provided with consciously literary features. The “author” of the “Historia” version presented the tale in as condensed and skeletal a form as possible and as befitted the context which he gave it. In its “Mabinogion” version the tale is expanded not so much by the addition of new material but by elaborating the style and introducing phrases to evoke audience response. In spite of these embellishments the *Cyfranc* still contains some “latinisms” natural to a translator, and though it is traditional in its vocabulary and clichés, and closer in syntax to the style of the *cyfarwyddyd* than is the more artificial style of the translators, the unimaginative treatment of its theme suggests that the “author” drew little from the springs of oral storytelling (Roberts 1975:xxxix-xxxii).

The case of *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* cannot be paralleled in the other Mabinogion tales, which have no earlier extant written antecedents, but it is an instructive general example which gives a frame of reference to discuss the relationship of these stories with traditional oral narratives. By “Mabinogion” is meant some eleven stories in Middle Welsh which are of native origin (Mac Cana 1977; Jones 1976; Roberts 1976a and b). Though found in the same two manuscripts (fragments of some tales are found elsewhere also), they do not constitute a collection but have different bases—myth, legend, historical tradition, Arthurian, etc., and were composed in their present forms at different times. The earliest, *Culwch and Olwen* and *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, belong to the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries; the others, *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys*, *The Dream of Maxen*, *Owein*, *Geraint and Enid*, and *Peredur*, appear to belong to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, while *The Dream of Rhonabwy* is probably the latest of all. The Tale of Taliesin, not being found in the two medieval

manuscripts which contain these tales, is not regarded as one of the “Mabinogion,” but this is no more than an accident of preservation and its base lies securely in traditional stories (Williams 1957; Wood 1981, 1982), though unlike the others, this contains passages of verse declaimed by the bard Taliesin interspersed with the prose narrative (Ford 1977). There is no doubt that the content of these tales is traditional, in that their motifs and themes can be recognized as those of international popular tales (Jackson 1961) and many of their episodes and characters as legendary Welsh (Bromwich 1974). These sometimes appear as allusions in other sources, e.g. Triads, poems in the Book of Taliesin etc., and differences between what is recorded in the tales and these point to the existence of oral variants of the same tradition. Within the tales themselves, doublets of certain episodes probably reflect different oral versions. But the texts of the tales, complete or in fragmentary forms, show very little significant variation and are in a single manuscript tradition, so that we must infer in most cases (*Owein* and *The Dream of Maxen* are ambiguous) a unique composed version, not a series of derivatives from oral versions as seems to be the case in the versions of the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Bromwich 1974; Melia 1974). The most thoroughly analyzed of the tales is *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (Jarman 1974; Jones 1976), but the complexity encountered here is merely the problem of the relationship of these tales to underlying oral narratives writ large. It seems always to have been accepted that individually (or collectively in the case of *The Four Branches*) these tales are the work of single authors, but what is difficult to resolve are questions such as whether these authors may be regarded as *cyfarwyddiaid*, whether the stories are oral traditional tales which have been given written form or whether they were conceived as written compositions which may have taken elements from a number of sources, and what changes may have occurred in the change of medium from spoken to written.

In one or two cases the text itself may offer guidance. Middle Welsh had more than one word for story or narrative in addition to *cyfarwyddyd*. The unmarked term is *chwedl* (etymologically, “that which is told”) and other terms may have denoted particular types, e.g. *ydddiddan*, dialogues; *cyfranc*, encounter; *hanes*, history, origin tale; *mabinogi*, tale of youth, of a hero. *Ystoria* (Latin *historia*) is used specifically for stories of

written origin, and by implication a literary composition or one not part of the stock-in-trade of the oral storyteller (Roberts 1974). *The Dream of Rhonabwy* (Richards 1948) has a colophon which claims that the wealth of descriptive detail which “this ystoria” contains was the reason “why no one, neither bard nor *cyfarwydd* knows the Dream without a book” (Jones and Jones 1948:152). The *Dream*, it would appear, was not narrated orally by traditional storytellers but read from a book; its text was fixed, allowing for no variation, and it was beyond the powers of memorization of poets or reciters who would normally have been assisted by metrical and stylistic forms to re-create their material. That the *Dream* is a conscious composition is confirmed by its satire of contemporary literary conventions and by the adroit manipulation of traditional themes which characterizes this remarkable work. Its themes can be recognized easily, but within the body of the tale, that is apart from its frame, these are not used as elements of composition in a progressive fashion; the result is that the story, lacking both a traditional and a devised coherent structure, makes satirical comment on recognized modes of composition. Its descriptive passages and its style of narration use the conventional phrases and patterns found in other Welsh written tales, but take them to extremes. If the style of the other Welsh tales has developed from oral style, what marks the *Dream* is its conscious imitation and exaggeration of some elements in oral storytelling. The equation “ystoria” = book, and by implication fixed, non-traditional text, becomes of further significance when one notes its use in *Geraint* and *Peredur*, two stories discussed below.

Robert C. Culley, writing on oral tradition and Biblical studies (1986:56), expressed the problem facing students of Middle Welsh literature admirably: “Almost all agree that the Bible [for our context “Welsh tales”] probably has oral antecedents, but there is little agreement on the extent to which oral composition and transmission have actually left their mark on the text or the degree to which one might be able to establish this lineage.” One of the greatest difficulties is the small database which has been preserved for us. The individual tales are not long and they normally exist in only two manuscript copies, so that though there is an obvious element of phrase and thematic repetition discernible in them, studies of “formulaic” density within a single text are not possible. One can, of course, examine “formulas” and more especially formulaic structure (themes or type-scenes) in the tales as a

corpus, but whatever conclusions might be drawn from such a study would be suspect until the chronological and literary relationships between them have been better assessed. The attention that has been paid to motif and thematic analysis of the Mabinogion stories has arisen from an implicit recognition of their traditional origins, but less regard has been had for these as compositional elements, and it is in this area that evidence for orality is to be sought. Nor is it clear to what extent these tales are literary retellings of existing oral texts or new compositions (or reassembly of fragments) based on traditional material. A narrative structure based on an oral thematic substratum may point to analogous stories in other oral cultures which would suggest that these tales existed previously (Melia 1972). There is little doubt that *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* reflects the shape of a traditional tale, whatever may have been its significance (Roberts 1975; Dumézil 1955). Hunt (1973-74) has drawn attention to the folktale structure of *Owein*, and it is easy to believe that the first part of *The Dream of Maxen* had a prior existence (Brewer-Jones 1975; for *Culhwch and Olwen* see Henry 1968 and for *The Four Branches* see Ó Coileáin 1977-78b, Hanson-Smith 1981-82). The most ambitious attempt to postulate an earlier narrative structure for a Welsh tale was W. J. Gruffydd's reconstruction of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* as a heroic biography, based on his interpretation of Irish saga, but it is probably true to say that this is too ambitious and comprehensive to be convincing.

The defects in coherent structure or rational progression which critics have discovered in *The Four Branches* have been attributed to deterioration and contamination over a long period of oral transmission preceding the penultimate or extant version, during which time the logic or "meaning" of the tale may have been lost (Gruffydd 1928, 1953), while other scholars have regarded these tales as the work of amateurs of an antiquarian bent or as compilations of sometimes unrelated materials (Jackson 1961; Mac Cana 1958). In recent years interest has moved away from the study of the historical origins of these stories, and together with an acceptance of individual authorship has grown an awareness of authorial intent so that what were previously viewed as deficiencies in structure are now perceived as features of composition which point to thematic developments and parallelisms, while the composed shape of each tale as it stands in the text is of greater importance than the recreation of an ideal or uncontaminated

traditional version. (For “non-traditional” structural analyses see Jones 1986, Ford 1977, 1981-82, and more literary analyses by Bollard 1974-75, 1983, McKenna 1980, Gantz 1979.)

Cyfarwyddyd had always been recorded by non-active bearers of tradition or those standing outside the stream of Welsh learning; and as the tales passed from the hands of their proper guardians, the poets, they lost their traditional significance and became free to become the vehicles for the purposes for which their new “authors” wished to deploy them. Though all these texts are anonymous, in them traditional narrative becomes personalized (Jones 1980), and each story must be read in the light of what can be learned of the author’s intent. Shepherd (1979) speaks of the emancipation of story in the twelfth century, Slotkin (1983) of encoding. The Mabinogion stories will have different intentions and will use traditional material in different ways. The change from the oral to the written medium has implications for style (see below and Roberts 1984) and for the movement of narrative (Bromwich 1974; Lord 1960:130-34; Chaytor 1945:48-82). But underlying these changes is the more basic one of a change of cultural attitude. The “author” is not as bound to his tradition as the *cyfarwydd*. He is free to derive his inspiration from a broader spectrum of influences, and his material ceases to be that of his community to be transmitted but his own to be interpreted or utilized. The freedom of interpretation this change allows us, however, must be exercised within the bounds of our ignorance, since very little is known of these “authors,” of the context and of the audience of the written stories, features which must be aspects of their intentionality.

The Mabinogion tales have always been highly regarded by critics for their stylistic virtues, which have been held to derive from oral storytelling techniques. Unlike Ireland, however, Wales now has no developed storytelling tradition which could provide a stylistic model by which to assess Middle Welsh tales, and we must attempt to draw from the Irish and other oral conventions features which may help us to postulate the oral basis of the written style of the tales and to recognize the changes brought about by the new medium (Ó Coileáin 1977-78a:33-34). Oral style is marked by a high degree of repetition of theme, episode, and phrase, by dialogue, by color of description and hyperbole, by comparisons and metaphors, all of which are part of the storyteller’s equipment. The essence of his art is its orality, that is

its sentence patterns, its vocabulary, its ability to use the resources of polished, perhaps even slightly archaic, speech, but it depends not so much on personal ability for its basis as on its conventions. Though strictly speaking a formula is a metrical device in oral poetry, prose storytellers use stereotyped forms of expression, variable combinations of words and phrases to express commonplaces, so that prose tales have what may be termed a formulaic quality, e.g. to denote undefined passage of time or a period of time, to give greeting or farewell, to open and close sections of tales or their beginnings and endings (Morgan 1951). Themes, or stereotyped narrative situations, will also be expressed in a similar way at each occurrence. These are rhetorical and functional devices which are normally brief. They may, however, if the situation requires, be developed and extended as a string of adjectives, often compounded and alliterating, or as a sequence of balanced rhythmical clauses, which a storyteller can memorize even if neither he nor his audience fully understands these “runs.” The audience recognizes conventional features of the art, and there is no doubt that listeners appreciate the skill and excitement of the “run” and observe the mastery of varying verbal and sentence patterns which characterizes oral art. Simplicity of plot and characterization are counterbalanced by the oral and aural features of the style, which for the best performers are enhanced by the conventions and not dominated by them.

The exuberance and formulaic nature of oral style may be reflected in some sixteenth-century compositions termed *areithiau pros* (“prose orations”) (Jones 1934). Though the majority of these appear to be self-conscious exercises in Renaissance rhetoric and abundance of language, some appear to be closer to a folk tradition and to retain in their themes and style oral features seen more clearly here than in the Middle Welsh tales (Roberts 1976b). The stories are marked by a constraint and conciseness which are designed more for the reader than the auditor, but which may suddenly flash into light with a group of adjectives and which use dialogue not simply for enlivening effect but as a narrative device. These are “formulas” (i.e. repeated phrases) but they are almost always controlled. This style, more suggestive of the study than the hall, is the result of tempering and toning down the *cyfarwydd*'s oral style and is one of the aspects of the change of medium. In short, all the Mabinogion tales would appear to use traditional material. Some reflect in their narrative structure

existing tales while others may be compilations, but though all reveal traces of oral origins in aspects of their construction and style (Jones 1984), none would appear to be strictly based on any particular oral telling (for *Hanes Taliesin*, perhaps a “comparatively late synthesis of material,” see Wood 1981:243). There will inevitably be disagreement as to how any particular text was produced, but there is now a consensus that the Mabinogion are to be viewed essentially as literary compositions by “authors” who were not oral *cyfarwyddiaid* but who were familiar with their storytelling stylistics.

This literary style is, at its first appearance, a self-assured, fluent, and mature style. Lord (1960:134) has claimed that “a superior written style is the development of generations. When a tradition or an individual goes from oral to written, he, or it, goes from an adult mature style of one kind to a faltering and embryonic style of another sort.” The few Old Welsh texts which remain can be regarded as examples of such a faltering prose style which nevertheless gained in fluency in the Old Welsh computus, and it is significant that by the end of the eleventh century when the composite text *Breint Teilo* (*The Privilege of the Church of St. Teilo*) was written (Davies 1975), Welsh prose had achieved more than the rudiments of style. It has been claimed that “in most countries where there are traces of a change from an oral to a literary tradition, development seems due to the intermediary of those trained to some degree in a foreign literary tradition,” and Lord’s example (1960:138) of the Yugoslav written epic as being developed not from oral tradition but an extension of Italian literary tradition is illustrative of this. The foreign literary tradition may, of course, be adjacent to the native and there is no doubt that the early development of written prose in Ireland was the result of fruitful interaction between the native learned class and the Church. It has been argued (Mac Cana 1977) that the situation in Wales was different, that oral narratives were of lower status and that monastic involvement in native culture was later, with the result that narrative prose was a late development (Evans 1982). The necessary fertilization came not from the ecclesiastical milieu but from the multi-cultured mixed (Anglo-Norman, English, Welsh) society of southeast Wales. It is, however, difficult to divorce the practice of writing from the Church, and the role of clerical Latin-trained writers as translators must have been one element in the development of writing Welsh in extended texts.

The origins of *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys*, described above, suggest an avenue. But this version, it was claimed, showed little evidence of any underlying oral style, nor do the Latin translators in general reveal any great familiarity with the oral conventions. Mac Cana (1977:13) has described the problem of adapting oral to written speech not so much as “that of transferring individual words and sentences from discourse to vellum as of coming to terms with a diction and style which are proper to the spoken word and adjusting the prodigality of the oral mode to the unavoidable economy of the earliest manuscripts.” We have seen that the first attempts at writing Welsh prose occurred in an intellectual milieu for resolving difficulties in some technical treatises but more significantly for recording agreements and legal decisions. *Breint Teilo*, the earliest part of which was written c. 950-c. 1090 (Davies 1975:133), was soon followed by the law books, the earliest copies of which are found in manuscripts of the late twelfth century (Latin) and the early thirteenth century (Welsh). But it is generally agreed that the Latin A text is a version of a Welsh prototype and that some of the tractates which make up the law books are as old as the tenth century. Native law, its practice and statement, was an oral activity, and Owen (1974) has shown not only that *Breint Teilo* and the law books reflect customary terminology and categories in their specialized vocabulary but that they contain clear oral stylistic features. The writers of these texts use a variety of styles—narrative, dramatic, historical, catalogues, rhetorical devices (e.g. contrast, doublets, alliteration, metaphors), and traditional elements (e.g. triads, proverbs). Lewis (1930) proposed many years ago that the origins of Welsh prose were to be sought in the law schools. Legal training owed less to schools of classical rhetoric (as he proposed), however, than to the place of the laws within that broad body of traditional and oral learning termed *cyfarwyddyd*. Archaic sections in the law books contain, incongruously in our eyes, fragments of legend and dynastic traditions, sometimes associated with verse stanzas. *Cyfarwyddyd* was all of a piece, but it appears that the first aspect of oral learning to be transferred to writing in an extended form was the legal, in the form of independent tractates. The lawyers, not “trained in a foreign literary tradition” but closely associated with the poets as a learned class, reacting perhaps to developments in England and to needs at home, were the necessary intermediaries

who would enable narrative prose to be a fully matured instrument at its first appearance.

The written form of *cyfarwydd* prose (Thomson 1968:xcviii-cii) became the accepted literary vehicle, with its own set of conventions and clearly marked apart from other Middle Welsh prose styles, for Welsh narrative throughout the Middle Welsh period. Its strength may be appreciated when one sees it used for translations of Anglo-Norman *chansons de geste* and for new Welsh versions of Old French romances. Reference has already been made to the stories of *Peredur*, *Owein*, and *Geraint*, all three of which have some relationship with three romances by Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval*, *Li chevalier au lion*, *Erec et Enide*. There is a wide variety of views on the nature of these relationships, but the Welsh texts may be retellings of the romances which have become adapted to native narrative structures and composed in the written *cyfarwydd* style (Roberts 1983, 1987). There seems no reason to believe that the extant Welsh versions derive directly from oral tales (though these may have been the antecedents of the French texts) and they are surely better regarded as literary works. Thus Hunt (1973-74), having stressed the oral origins of *Owein*, nevertheless concludes his study with the view that an antiquarian entertainer refurbished Chrétien's poem and that the preservation of the Welsh story is a "late and essentially bookish affair." Edel (1981-82) finds clear evidence for orality in *Peredur* but regards the text as an oral (I would say "literary *cyfarwydd* style") retelling of *Perceval*. This style makes its last appearance in the Welsh adaptation of *The Seven Sages of Rome* (Lewis 1925), and thereafter literary prose followed another path.

Oral storytelling continued but the deterioration in the status of the tales, which had begun in the medieval period, continued. We cannot assess whether there was any change in the manner of recitation, but categories of tales were apparently lost. The sixteenth-century chronicler Elys Gruffydd (Jones 1960) used a wide range of written sources in Welsh, English, and French in his compendious history of the world, but he frequently draws on Welsh material for which no other literary source is known and which appears to be derived from his own familiarity with a living oral tradition. Gruffydd has his own idiosyncratic style which has largely obliterated traces of a more traditional medium, but his ability to blend narratives of historical tradition with his translations and paraphrases from recognized texts suggests that he

found these in a recognizably coherent historical framework. Other specific references to storytelling also suggest that history is the central theme. A sixteenth-century account describes gatherings “where their harpers and crowthers sing them songs of the doings of their auncestors” (Williams 1949), and in the same period a Welsh author exiled in Italy recalls the entertainments of his native land, viz. poetry and old men who could relate orally every notable and praiseworthy deed performed in ancient Wales (Williams 1949). One suspects that the historical aspect of traditional learning increasingly engaged the attention of the professional poets and their patrons by the sixteenth century, but that the debates regarding the authenticity of the British history led to greater emphasis being laid on the written sources, most of which represent Welsh adaptations of Geoffrey of Monmouth, others being contemporary English and Latin chronicles. History inevitably became the domain of book-learning, and the oral historical tradition further declined so that all that can be recovered in the early modern period is local family lore (Jones 1955) and anecdotes found as jottings in manuscripts (Jones 1970). Antiquarians made compilations—e.g. tales of giants by John David Rhÿs in the sixteenth century (Owen 1917) and a combination of fake-lore and genuine tradition by the eighteenth-century Edward Williams (1848)—and descriptions by nineteenth-century and recent folklore fieldworkers suggest that a tradition of storytelling and of oral entertainment lived on until conditions changed the nature of rural society and lessened the need of the agricultural community for shared effort. The best of the nineteenth-century collectors was John Rhÿs, who not only prints tales verbatim but also gives the context in which they were told. The evidence of one of his informants (Rhÿs 1901, I:78-80) is suggestive in that it distinguishes between two storytellers by the nature of their repertoire and also refers to another as “the ‘Old Guide’,” which appears to be a translation of “yr Hen Gyfarwydd.” If this is so, then this society had retained both the traditional nomenclature and the vestiges of a functional organization of storytelling, but Rhÿs’s normal experience (1901:Preface 1) was that he “could not get a single story of any length from the mouths of his fellow countrymen in the 1870’s.” Modern collectors (Jones 1930; Gwyndaf 1970, 1980) report few if any *Märchen*. There are no collections of oral narratives between Ells Gruffydd and the nineteenth-century folklorists and romantics, but the fragments

found here and there in manuscripts (Jones 1955; Jones 1970) confirm the impression of an oral narrative tradition in decline.

Controlled collection and the study of folk tradition have developed significantly since the establishment of the Welsh Folk Museum at St. Fagan's near Cardiff in 1946. Gwyndaf (1970, 1980, 1984) has described the categories represented in the folk narrative collection and a motif-index is in preparation. One hopes that the greater accessibility of the corpus will lead researchers to study more closely than has been possible hitherto not only the motifs but the stylistics and registers of the narratives, their contexts and the role of audience response. Much of this material is anecdotal, humorous, and brief; texts of any length are rare, and there is little scope for compositional analysis. There is, however, an area of oral culture which has always been regarded as particularly Welsh, but which has had almost no examination by students of orality.

Since the mid-eighteenth century Wales has been predominantly a land of evangelical nonconformists in religion. Preaching has occupied a central place in chapel worship, and public prayer, by ordained ministers and lay people, has been extempore. Both activities provide very clear examples of oral compositional techniques and of the ways in which these are acquired. Extempore prayer is highly "formulaic" and depends a great deal on the cultural resonance of words and phrases; its exponents reveal a range of mastery of these techniques which the "audience" recognizes. Extempore prayers are by nature fluid in structure and cannot be compared to narratives. Nevertheless, an analysis would reveal a structure based on a fairly constant order of variable petitions, and at a prayer meeting held on a specific occasion (harvest thanksgiving, missionary meeting, New Year, etc.) prayers acquire a sequence of expected petitions. Based on personal meditation, prayers are not prepared verbally in detail but are orally composed (though in some cases passages may be memorized verbatim). Sermons, however, are composed in the study and are usually prepared in note-form. To that extent, both in the development of its matter and in its expression the sermon has become a fixed form and will be structured in what has become a traditional pattern; but within these limits the preacher will re-create his sermon each occasion he delivers it, varying its emphases, altering its rhetoric and dramatic features, retaining some passages verbatim while composing others afresh.

The variation, or the delivery of a “new” sermon, arises from his own intention, but it would be idle to pretend that the response of his congregation (heard or sensed by him) does not have a role in the ever-changing character of the sermon (Brewer 1967). To hear the same sermon preached two or three times by the same preacher gives a good insight into what the oral storyteller means when he insists that there is no significance in the variants between versions noted by literate observers (Lord 1960:28). Sermons are rigidly structured, their rhetorical devices are capable of analysis both by composition and by function, and they can be learned and reproduced by listeners. The oral tradition of Welsh nonconformity is now in its final stages of decline, but until comparatively recently it was the only contemporary Welsh oral tradition. An analysis of its forms, of the interacting roles of locutor and audience, and of the social patterns of acquiring skills would, *mutatis mutandis*, do much to illuminate the storytelling tradition of a culture which has lost it. It would, of course, be of value for its own sake as a study of orality.

Little sustained work has been done on the oral antecedents of Middle Welsh narratives. Studies of formulaic repetition and structure have, almost by definition, been carried out on verse epics and Slotkin (1977) has rightly objected to the use of the term “formula” to denote simply any verbal repetition. But in almost all applications of the theory to national literatures, “the starting point has been a modification of the original conception, adjusted to suit the demands of the particular language being studied and the tradition in which it was being performed” (Rosenberg 1981:443). Rosenberg here also raises the question whether the oral formula is exclusively a poetic device. There are difficulties in attempting to adapt classical Parry-Lord analyses to prose narratives such as are characteristic of the Welsh narrative tradition, but a study, using a rigorous methodology, of repeated phrases and their thematic contexts would be very useful. Sioned Davies’ unpublished Oxford DPhil dissertation (1983) is an important step in this direction, and Jones (1986) breaks new ground in his Appendix on “stylistic structure,” but in view of the literary nature of the Welsh stories which has been stressed above, any aesthetic evaluation will have to take account of the

way an earlier formulaic technique has been used in this written literature (Lord 1974:201-10).

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