

## Storytelling in Medieval Wales

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### The Storyteller

Very little is known of the storyteller and his functions in medieval Welsh society. Welsh sources imply that tales were recited *in prose* by professional storytellers—the *cyfarwyddiaid* (singular *cyfarwydd*). In medieval Ireland, there is evidence to suggest that the composition of both prose and poetry was linked to the *fili*, the poet, although storytelling was not one of his main functions.<sup>1</sup> In Wales, however, there is no direct evidence regarding the relationship between the *bardd* (poet) and *cyfarwydd* (storyteller). One much quoted passage in an eleventh-century tale tells of Gwydion and his companions visiting the court of Pryderi in the guise of poets<sup>2</sup>—

They were made welcome. Gwydion was placed beside Pryderi that night. “Why,” said Pryderi, “gladly would we have a tale [*cyfarwyddyd*] from some of the young men yonder.” “Lord,” said Gwydion, “it is a custom with us that the first night after one comes to a great man, the chief bard [*pencerdd*] shall have the say. I will tell a tale gladly.” Gwydion was the best teller of tales [*cyfarwydd*] in the world. And that night he entertained the court with pleasant tales and storytelling [*cyfarwyddyd*] till he was praised by everyone in the court.

—while on another occasion Gwydion, in the guise of a poet from Glamorgan (in South Wales) is made welcome at a North Wales court and narrates *cyfarwyddyd* (stories) after feasting (Jones and Jones 1949:67). Both passages are open to interpretation regarding the role and significance

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<sup>1</sup> Mac Cana 1980; see also Bromwich 1978:lxxxiii-lxxxvi.

<sup>2</sup> Jones and Jones 1949:56-57; for the Welsh, see I. Williams 1930:69. From this point on, all quotations from Jones and Jones 1949 will be made by page number(s) only.

of the poet/storyteller in medieval Wales. The implication is that the poet would travel from court to court, even from north to south of the country; he was a welcome guest and would be honored with the seat next to the ruler of the court; the *pencerdd* (chief poet) was accompanied by a retinue of lesser poets; it was not the rule for the *pencerdd* to narrate stories, rather this was the domain of the lesser poets; and finally, the purpose of the *cyfarwydd* was to entertain. Even so, this does not necessarily equate the poet with the storyteller—one could argue, with Mac Cana (1980:138), that the term *cyfarwydd* is an occasional title that primarily denotes a function rather than a social or professional class. It must be emphasized that there is a paucity of evidence regarding the poet/storyteller relationship in medieval Wales. The medieval law tracts, for example, do not list the *cyfarwydd* among the 24 officers of the king's court, although the *pencerdd* holds an important position (Jenkins 1986:3-41). The passages discussed may also reflect what the author thought to be past usage and therefore may not be historically accurate (Roberts 1984:212).

It must be remembered, however, that storytelling has been one of the main functions of the poet in Europe throughout the centuries. The convention in most IndoEuropean countries was that a story should be narrated in verse. The *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid* are metrical narratives; the bulk of Anglo-Saxon literature was in alliterative verse—the epic *Beowulf*, the shorter epic *Waldhere*, the heroic poems of *Finn*, *Deor*, and *Widsith*. On the other hand, English *prose* literature tends to be religious, historical, or philosophical in its appeal. In France, non-didactic literature was in metrical form until the end of the twelfth century—Old French epics such as *The Song of Roland* were composed in assonant verse; the series of French romances produced in the third quarter of the twelfth century were versified. It would seem, therefore, that Celtic narrative literature follows a totally different pattern, for in Ireland and Wales the earliest surviving narrative texts are in prose. The nature of the poetic tradition seems to have been different among the Celts too: verse was mainly, if not wholly, employed for elegy and eulogy.

The situation in medieval Wales was, therefore, a complex one, which our fragmentary evidence, as emphasized by Brynley Roberts (1984:212) cannot adequately portray. Medieval Welsh bardic triads affirm a strong connection between *cyfarwyddyd* and *barddoniaeth* (poetry):

Three things pertain to the poet:

Poetry, memory, and *cyfarwyddyd*. . . .

There are three types of *cyfarwyddyd*: heroic verse, histories,

and poetry.

(G. Williams and Jones 1934:134)

According to another triad:

Three things give a poet amplitude:  
Knowledge of histories, and poetry, and heroic verse.  
(*ibid.*:18)

—while a late medieval treatise states:

The three memories of the bard are:  
knowledge of history, language and genealogies.  
(Bromwich 1974:52)

It would seem that the original meaning of *cyfarwyddyd* was not “tale,” but rather “traditional lore” or traditional learning that was necessary for society to function (Roberts 1988:62). The term itself is connected etymologically with “knowledge, guidance, perception,” and the *cyfarwydd* was “the guide, well-informed person, expert” (Mac Cana 1980:139). Various classes of learned men would have been responsible for the different aspects of *cyfarwyddyd*, including the lawyers, mediciners, and bards. The bardic *cyfarwyddyd* would have been transmitted in verse form (panegyric verse, gnomic poetry), while other material would have been transmitted in the form of oral narrative. Although originally these narratives were intended to be informative, they came to be viewed more and more as entertainment (Edel 1983), hence the later semantic development of *cyfarwyddyd* in Middle Welsh where it is commonly used for “story, narrative,” and *cyfarwydd* for “storyteller.” Or as suggested by Mac Cana (1980:139), what may have happened is that the semantic range of the word *cyfarwydd* used as a quasi-literary term became gradually narrowed until in the end it was virtually confined to only one, and that a lesser one, of its older connotations.

## The Tales

What of the content and style of the storytellers’ tales? We obviously have no oral records of the period, and must therefore turn to written medieval texts of native Welsh tales. As stated by Robert Kellogg (1991:137), the earliest vernacular texts represent a collaboration between the two cultures, oral and literate. Although these Welsh tales were the

product of a literary culture, the inherited rules of oral art surely played an essential role in their composition. Unfortunately, few such tales have survived—eleven in all. They have been preserved mainly in two Welsh collections, the White Book of Rhydderch (c. 1350) and the Red Book of Hergest (c. 1400).<sup>3</sup> Fragments also occur in a manuscript earlier by a hundred years or so, while certain of the stories must have been known in their present redaction well before the time of the earliest of these manuscripts. The tales are known today as the *Mabinogion*. This collective title was first given to the tales by Lady Charlotte Guest who translated them into English between 1838 and 1849 (Guest 1849). However, the word *mabinogion* occurs only once in the original text, and is almost certain to be a scribal error. Yet, *mabinogion* has become a convenient term to describe this corpus of prose tales, although we should not perceive them as a unified collection of any kind—they all vary in date, background, and content. The earliest tales seem to be *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (*The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*), generally referred to as *Pwyll*, *Branwen*, *Manawydan*, and *Math*, dated c. 1060-1120; *Culhwch ac Olwen* (*Culhwch and Olwen*) is the earliest Arthurian prose tale, dated c. 1100; *Breuddwyd Maxen* (*The Dream of Maxen*) and the three Welsh Arthurian romances of *Owein*, *Peredur*, and *Gereint* with their counterparts in the French poems of Chrétien de Troyes belong to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* (*The Encounter of Lludd and Llefelys*) first appears in the thirteenth century when a Welsh translator of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* inserted it into his translation—the episode then appears as an independent tale in the White Book and Red Book manuscripts; *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* (*The Dream of Rhonabwy*) is the latest of all and is a parody on the Arthurian age (Mac Cana 1977; Jones 1976; Roberts 1986).

### Oral Influence on Written Tales

These are the only remaining examples of traditional Welsh narrative—obviously much has been lost as testified by allusions in these and other sources, especially the bardic triads (Bromwich 1978). It must be emphasized at the start that great care is needed when analyzing these tales, especially if they are to reveal something about the art of storytelling in

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the manuscripts, see Huws 1991 and G. Charles-Edwards 1979-80.

medieval Wales. The relationship between these written texts and oral versions of the same tales is unclear. It is not known whether the authors themselves were *cyfarwyddiaid* who wrote down their oral versions or whether the tales were conceived as written compositions, the authors taking elements from a number of sources, including oral ones. Also, what can be said of one tale does not necessarily follow for any of the others—they all have differing backgrounds and sources. However, I should like to put forward the thesis that the tales of the *Mabinogion* are the work of a number of *cyfarwyddiaid* and/or redactors who recognized and respected the same prime criteria when narrating a story. Thus, although our extant texts have been greatly influenced by their being committed to writing, the “authors” were still very conscious of the demands of a successful oral performance, or were so familiar with them that they could not break away from the stylistic methods used by the *cyfarwyddiaid*. We may also have influences from further afield. But in the main it is the narrative techniques and artistic vitality of tellers of tales *per se* in early and medieval Wales that determine the style of the *Mabinogion*.

In an attempt to assess the extent to which oral techniques may have influenced the written medieval texts, it would seem prudent to examine texts whose provenance is already known. As emphasized by Slotkin (1991), the speculations of writers like Walter Ong and Eric Havelock are no substitutes for immersing oneself in genuine oral narrations. Slotkin argues that until we uncover the basis of the poetics of oral narration from genuinely oral texts, we cannot say anything definite about texts from the Middle Ages (21). Unfortunately, Wales today has no developed storytelling tradition that could provide a model by which to assess Middle Welsh tales. The Welsh Folk Museum at St. Fagan’s, Cardiff, has been responsible for the collection and study of folk tradition since 1946. However, as yet there has been no detailed analysis of the stylistics of the corpus. It is hoped that the setting up of an M.A. in Welsh Ethnological Studies, taught jointly between the Department of Welsh at Cardiff and the staff of the Folk Museum, will be a step in the right direction. Even so, as emphasized by Roberts (1988:79), much of the material is anecdotal, humorous, and brief. We must, therefore, rely mainly on the evidence offered by modern-day Irish and other oral tellers, and attempt to draw some general conclusions regarding the nature of oral performance and its influence on written medieval texts.

*Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*  
*(The Four Branches of the Mabinogi)*

I should like to proceed by focusing on one group of tales from the *Mabinogion*. An analysis of the complete corpus is obviously beyond the scope of this article, but is the subject of a volume currently in preparation by the author. I shall therefore analyze specific features in detail, and also draw comparisons with other tales from the corpus.

The *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* were composed between 1060 and 1100 (T. Charles-Edwards 1970; SimsWilliams 1991). They consist of four branches or tales, commonly known as *Pwyll*, *Branwen*, *Manawydan*, and *Math* (Davies 1992b). Their roots lie in Celtic mythology—their characters are otherworld beings, and their world is one where the supernatural impedes on the lives of everyday mortals. It is generally held that the *Four Branches* are the work of one individual, not a reporter's transcript of a spoken tale, but the product of one mind, a deliberate artistic piece of literature. Indeed, the author may well have been Sulien, bishop of St. David's, or his son Rhigyfarch. Even so, the author is clearly drawing on traditional sources for his material. He states on two occasions (40, 75): "And that is what this *cyfarwyddyd* says of their encounter. 'The men who set forth from Ireland' is that"; "And according to the *cyfarwyddyd*, he was lord thereafter over Gwynedd."

In other words, he is trying to distance himself from the traditional material. As Kellogg says of the Compiler of the Codex Regius 2365 (a thirteenth-century Icelandic manuscript), he is capable of stepping out of the fictional world and referring, from outside, in the voice of a thirteenth-century scholar to the poems as poems (1991:138)—here a twelfth-century scholar is referring to the tales as tales. Like the Icelandic compiler, too, the Welsh narrator refers to "former times": "They had the boy baptized with the baptism that was used then"; "they baptized her with the baptism they used at that time" (20, 68). He, like the Icelandic compiler, is aware of himself as occupying a boundary between two worlds—his own rational, scholarly, literary world and the more fantastic world of ancient myth and legend from which the tales have come down (Kellogg 1991:139). Even so, I would argue that his style still remains, to a large extent, indebted to the oral craft of the *cyfarwydd*.

### Some Oral Features of Medieval Welsh Storytelling

I shall now examine three features that are very much in evidence in the *Four Branches*, namely, additive style together with an emphasis on chronological order, dialogue, and the formula.

#### *Chronological Order and Additive Style*

Throughout the four tales there is an emphasis on chronological order, logical and harmonious progression. The main purpose of the storyteller was to entertain, as testified by Gwydion, and we see the narrator progressing from one event to the next, without pausing for explanation. The *Four Branches* have a clear chronological and episodic structure, with a single strand to the narrative.<sup>4</sup> The narrator carefully covers the transition from one period to the next—the interstices between the important and exciting occasions are always filled. The art of linking major events was an important part of his craft and is apparent in passages such as (11,31):

They came to the court and they spent that night in song and carousal, so that they were content. And on the morrow they spent the day until it was time to go to eat.

They continued to converse that night, while it pleased them, and to carouse. And when they perceived that it was better for them to go to sleep than to sit any longer, they went to sleep.

The effect of this emphasis on progression is noticeable on the *Four Branches* and also on the other tales of the *Mabinogion*.

A great number of “connectors” are apparent throughout the tales; “and then,” “and upon that,” “and the following day,” “and that day,” and so forth. The sentences are linked by conjunctions or joining phrases—the emphasis is on the additive style throughout. Note the opening passage from *Pwyll* (3):

Pwyll prince of Dyfed was lord over the seven cantrefs of Dyfed; and once upon a time he was at Arberth, a chief court of his, and it came into his head and heart to go a-hunting. The part of his domain which it pleased him to hunt was Glyn Cuch. And he set out that night from Arberth, and came as far as Pen Llwyn Diarwya, and there he was that night. And on the morrow

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Olrik 1965:137; Ong 1982:139-47; Rosenberg 1990:154.

in the young of the day he arose and came to Glyn Cuch to loose his dogs into the wood. And he sounded his horn and began to muster the hunt, and followed after the dogs and lost his companions; and whilst he was listening to the cry of the pack, he could hear the cry of another pack, but they had not the same cry, and were coming to meet his own pack.

It has been claimed that additive style is a common feature of oral prose narrative.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is extremely common in the samples I analyzed from the Welsh Folk Museum corpus.

### *Dialogue*

Another feature of oral prose narrative seems to be the extensive use of dialogue. Delargy remarks upon this when discussing Irish narrative (1945:33):

A characteristic feature of early and medieval Irish prose narrative is the effective and skillful use of dialogue, and this is very marked in the modern Gaelic folk-tale. . . . A good story-teller rarely departs from *oratio recta*. . . .

—as does Alan Bruford in his study of *Gaelic Folk-Tales and Mediaeval Romances* (1969). In the Middle Ages, oral entertainment was the prime means of entertainment, and conversation must therefore have been all-important. The ability to hold a good conversation was a great virtue. Pryderi says of his mother: “I am sure that you have never heard a better conversationalist than she,” while the king of the Otherworld’s wife possesses the same virtue: “And he began to converse with the queen. And of all he had ever seen to converse with, she was the most unaffected woman, and the most gracious of disposition and discourse” (41, 5-6) .

Conversation would therefore have been a perennial form of entertainment. Indeed, the original meaning of the Welsh verb *ymddiddan* (“to converse”) was “to entertain each other.” What would have been the content of such conversations in the Middle Ages? There would no doubt be news and gossip. But also, surely, anecdotes and humorous occurrences would be related. Teyrnnon’s conversation is concerned with the story of Pryderi’s youth (22):

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Ong 1982:38; Tannen 1982.



When they had finished eating, at the beginning of the carousal, they conversed. Teyrnon's conversation was an account in full of his adventure with the mare and the boy . . . .

Matholwch tells a story as he is conversing: "As much as I know, I will tell you. I was hunting in Ireland one day . . ." (30). Indeed, so often did people relate anecdotes and tales to each other, that *ymddiddan* became a term for a tale, as the romance of *Owein* suggests (155-56):

"Now," said Cei, "it is for you to pay me my *ymddiddan* [story]." "Cynon," said Owein, "pay Cei his *ymddiddan*." "God knows," said Cynon, "an older man and a better *ymddiddanwr* [teller of tales] are you than I. More have you seen of wondrous things. You pay Cei his *ymddiddan*." "You start," said Owein, "with the most wondrous thing you know." . . . "I was the only son of my father and mother, and I was high spirited . . ."

An *ymiddiddan*, like a *cyfarwyddyd*, is to be full of "wondrous things." There is one main difference, however, between the two narrative forms. In his *ymiddiddan*, Cynon talks in the first person; throughout he makes remarks to Cei, and although they elicit no response, Cei is still the chief auditor (157):

And this I tell you, Cei, that I am sure . . .

Thus the tale is an *ymddiddan* (= "conversation") in so far as Cynon addresses another character, and also speaks in the first person. In a *cyfarwyddyd*, however, the narrator is totally divorced from the tale—he himself took no part in the action of the story. A *cyfarwydd* ("storyteller"), of course, could also narrate *ymddiddaneu*—Gwydion entertains the court with "ymdidaneu digrif" ("pleasant dialogues") (57). It seems to me that an *ymddiddan*, therefore, was a short anecdote recited by a speaker, probably concerning his or her own experiences (cf. Ford 1975-76). But in his performance, a storyteller could also make use of *ymddiddan* in its original sense: he could re-create conversation and dialogue in order to vary his rendering and to create a dramatic atmosphere.

It is clear that dialogue plays an essential part in the *Four Branches*:

% of direct speech in narrative

<i>Pwyll</i>	42%
<i>Branwen</i>	39%
<i>Manawydan</i>	43%
<i>Math</i>	37%
Overall	40%

Note the figures for the other tales of the *Mabinogion*:

% of direct speech in narrative

<i>Peredur</i>	41%
<i>Owein</i>	44% (including Cynon's tale) 27.5% (discounting Cynon's tale)
<i>Gereint</i>	38%
<i>Culhwch ac Olwen</i>	45% (including lists)
<i>Breuddwyd Maxen</i>	16%
<i>Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys</i>	20%
<i>Breuddwyd Rhonabwy</i>	21.5%

These statistics are quite revealing. *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* is known to have a learned Latin context—it is not a tale deriving directly from oral tradition; *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, too, claims to be a written text from the beginning, rather than a tale with a long oral background (152):

And this *ystoria* [tale] is called the Dream of Rhonabwy. And this is why no one, neither poet nor *cyfarwydd*, knows the Dream without a book, because of the many colours of the horses, the many rare hues both of their armour and their accoutrements, and of the valuable cloaks and precious stones.

One could agree with Brynley Roberts when he says that such colorful descriptive passages would not have taxed the trained memory of an oral storyteller, indeed that they are of the essence of his art, and the gloss is an attempt to explain why the tale was commonly read, not recited (1984:213). It should also be noted that the term *ystoria* (from Latin *historia*) is used for many texts, including religious and instructional manuals translated from Latin, and seems to refer to texts emanating from a written rather than an oral background. Does this suggest, therefore, that a high percentage of dialogue within a narrative is an indication of an oral background?

One characteristic of the *Four Branches* is the constant use of identification tags or speech markers in passages of dialogue—*heb ef / heb hi* (“he said” / “she said”) is the most common. Sometimes the narrator states who is going to speak and to whom; then the speech occurs within which another speech marker, usually involving a pronoun, is embedded: “The horseman drew near him, and spoke to him thus, ‘Chieftain,’ he said, ‘I know not who you are . . .’” (4). This technique is very common in contemporary oral storytelling—recordings that I have analyzed in the Welsh Folk Museum archive prove this beyond any doubt. Alan Bruford attempts to explain the feature in his discussion of dialogue in Irish romances (1969:34):

It may seem unduly full of apostrophes to the hearer and assertions by the speaker’s word, but this again is required by oral delivery. If the speaker begins “A *Chonail* . . .” the audience realizes at once that he is speaking to Conall; they might have forgotten who was present at this stage.

Rarely is the embedded marker omitted—this is by far the most common way of dealing with dialogue in the *Mabinogion* tales. There are very few examples of direct speech without markers in the *Four Branches*, *Gereint*, and *Owein*; in *Peredur* and *Culhwch ac Olwen*, however, the instances are far more numerous, and passages of dialogue without markers also occur. Indeed, the major dialogue scenes in *Culhwch ac Olwen* are all conveyed without identification tags. Another significant point is that a comparison of the Red Book and White Book versions of *Culhwch ac Olwen* shows that the Red Book version often inserts speech markers, while in the White Book version they are omitted. I have tried to show elsewhere that the Red Book version of *Culhwch ac Olwen* contains more features associated generally with oral narrative (1992a). Can we therefore take the overwhelming presence of speech markers as a suggestion of an oral background? Note also that *Peredur* has many passages without speech markers—the narrator claims to be drawing on an *ystoria*: “And Peredur ruled with the empress fourteen years, as the *ystoria* [story] tells.” Much more research and analysis must be undertaken before any definite conclusions can be reached, if then; also, one feature alone, without other kinds of evidence, is no evidence of orality. However, the occurrence, presentation, and function of dialogue in our written texts may in the future reveal more about the nature of storytelling in medieval Wales.

### *The Formula*

Much has been written on the significance of the formula in oral poetry. According to Milman Parry, the formula developed as an element in oral composition: in the course of time the need for a particular phrase arises over and over again; the phrase therefore becomes fixed and the poet uses it regularly, thus creating a formula. The unlettered singer builds up a reserve of ready-made formulas that enables him to rise immediately to most needs that his subject forces on him. According to Parry's theory (1971), the main feature of orally composed poetry is its formulaic character, and the recurrence of formulas brands a poem as oral. The use of Parry's methods has been accompanied by increasing questions about the validity of some of his most basic assumptions and definitions, including his definition of a formula (e.g., Finnegan 1990). Also, there is little agreement on whether formulaic style implies oral composition, whether literacy and oral composition are always mutually exclusive. Many believe Parry's definition of the formula to be too narrow (e.g., Russo 1976), and feel that it should embrace more than the fixed noun-epithet combinations of Parry's first study. Indeed, Parry himself emphasizes a formula-system, introducing the concept of the open variable combined with the fixed element to form a larger unit, and prepares the way for further broadening of the definition by saying that there were still "more general types of formulas": not only were there fixed or verbatim formulas, but also fluid formulas that resemble others "in rhythm, in parts of speech, and in one important word" (Russo 1976:32; Parry 1930 [1971]:133).

### *The Formula and Prose Narrative*

To what extent can these theories be applied to prose, and to medieval Welsh prose in this particular case? Meter is an essential ingredient in the Parry-Lord formula. Even so, there have been many attempts to adapt the theory to prose. İlhan Başgöz, for example, in his treatment of the *hikaye* of Azerbaijan, argues that verbal repetition is a distinct feature of orally transmitted literature, prose and verse alike (1978:1; Gray 1971). He defines the prose formula as a traditional, literary unit of verbal repetition that expresses a given essential idea (formula-thought) in one or more phrases (3). Isidore Okpewho, too, comes to the conclusion that there is nothing particularly metrical about the formula: "... the formulary device is simply a case of memory pressed into a pattern

of convenience, and is by no means peculiar to a prosodic context . . .” (1977:190). Kevin O’Nolan applied the formula concept to Irish medieval prose romances and he also concluded that meter has no essential connection with formulas, in spite of Parry’s definition (1969, 1975, 1978). Edgar Slotkin, in an excellent paper entitled “The Oral Hypothesis of Medieval Celtic Literature” delivered at the International Celtic Congress, Paris, 1991, strongly criticized O’Nolan’s theory. Slotkin’s thesis is that there is no such thing as an oral prose formula in the sense of the unit defined by Parry and Lord. One must be able to show that there is a high density of formulas in a text and that they are necessary to the composition before one can argue for an oral provenance—this is not the case in O’Nolan’s research. Slotkin’s paper raises very important issues. However, I would tend to agree with Rosenberg (1981:443), who argues that 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. There are difficulties in adapting the classical Parry-Lord analyses to prose narratives. Perhaps it would be safer to avoid the term “formula” with all its connotations, and employ another term such as “verbal repetition” or “traditional pattern” when dealing with prose. However, in spite of the possible confusion, I have chosen to use the term “formula” in my analysis of medieval Welsh tales, although I wish to make it clear that I do not use it in the Parry-Lord sense. Neither do I equate the presence of formulas with oral composition. The eleven tales of the *Mabinogion* are not markedly formulaic (Roberts 1984:216), yet I would argue that certain phrases and descriptions are used so frequently that they must be more than chance combinations: we can be fairly certain that we are dealing with an acquired technique. The suggestion is that the authors were drawing on a stock of stereotyped forms of expression or formulas, and that they would build on these formulas as the need arose. This is not to say that the tales were composed orally; yet the implication is that these formulas were part of the technique of the oral storyteller and that the oral style has left its mark on the written texts (Davies 1988b).

### *Linguistic Formulas*

These consist of oaths and greetings and are apparent in dialogue passages; they were, perhaps, part of the everyday language of the period.

Although they do not further the development of the plot in any way, they are important as regards the presentation and maintaining of dialogue.

## GREETINGS

By means of the greeting formulas two characters are brought face to face with each other; the oaths, on the other hand, may occur several times within the same speech, and normally under the same conditions. In the *Four Branches* two formulas occur in conjunction with each other when greeting, that is one character greets and the other replies at once. *Duw a rodo da yt* (*a chraessaw duw wrthyt*) (“God be good to you [and God’s welcome to you]”) is the usual answer. The first greeting is *Dyd da itt* (“Good day to you”), *Henpych guell* (“Greetings”), or an indirect greeting, that is, *cyfarch guell idaw* (“he greeted him”). Here is an example from *Pwyll* (I. Williams 1982:13-14, Jones and Jones 1949:13):

a guedy y dyuot y gynted y neuad kyuarch guell a wnaeth y Wawl uab  
Clut a’y gedymdeithon o wyr a gwaged. “Duw a ro da yt,” heb y Gwawl,  
“a chraessaw Duw wrthyt.”

[and when he came to the upper part of the hall he greeted Gwawl son of  
Clut and his company of men and women. “God be good to you,” said  
Gwawl, “and God’s welcome to you.”]

Note how the author plays on this formula when describing Pwyll and Arawn’s first encounter: “‘Ah lord,’ he [Arawn] said, ‘I know who you are, and I will not greet you’” (4). Usually it is the character of lower status who greets first, and the other responds by wishing him *graessaw Duw* (“God’s welcome”) (T. Charles-Edwards 1978). Pwyll believes Arawn is refusing to greet him because of his status: “‘Yes,’ he [Pwyll] said, ‘and perhaps your status is such that it should not do so’” (4). When Pwyll realizes that Arawn is a king, and therefore of higher rank than he, he responds immediately: “‘Lord,’ he said, ‘good day to you’” (4). This is an interesting example, therefore, of manipulating a formula for a specific purpose. Turning our attention to the *Mabinogion* tales as a whole, we find that although formal greetings are not extensively used, the narrators nevertheless adhere to the same formulaic phrases when the occasion does arise.

## OATHS

The oath or curse is an example of an emotive or expressive function of language (Crystal 1987:4). Sex, excretion, and the supernatural are the main sources of swear-words. In the *Mabinogion* tales, the majority of oaths refer to God. The following oaths are found in the *Four Branches*:

<i>y rof i a Duw</i>	("between me and God")
<i>dioer</i>	("God knows")
<i>yr Duw</i>	("for God's sake")
<i>ym kyffes y Duw</i>	("by my confession to God")
<i>oy a arglwyd Duw</i>	("oh lord God")
<i>oy a uab Duw</i>	("oh son of God")
<i>oy a Duw holl gyuoethawc</i>	("oh all powerful God")
<i>oy a Duw</i>	("of God")
<i>meuyl ar uy maryf</i>	("shame on my beard")

A detailed analysis of the oaths in the *Mabinogion* corpus points to the existence of some sort of system—they have a particular location within the speech, various oaths occur under the same grammatical conditions (e.g., after a negative), and most oaths are followed by a speech marker (e.g., "he/she said").

*Variable Formulas*

The oaths are verbatim formulas; the greetings are combinations of verbatim units that combine to give a longer formula. Another type of formula is found to be much more common in the *Mabinogion* corpus, namely the variable formula, where identity is established by similar structural patterns and repetition of key words. There are two categories within this type of formula—the first combines formulaic units to give a longer formula, while the second consists of one verbal pattern only.

## PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Variable formulas are employed in the *Four Branches* to describe

physical appearance.<sup>6</sup> There are very few long and detailed descriptions in the branches, and very few adjectives; for example (I. Williams 1930, Jones and Jones 1949:13):

wynt a welynt yn dyuot y mywn, guas gwineu mawr teyrneid a guisc o  
bali amdanaw

[they saw enter a tall princely auburn-haired youth, and a garment of  
brocaded silk about him]

For another example (I. Williams 1930:35, Jones and Jones 1949:30):

A mi a welwn gwr melyngoch mawr yn dyuot or llyn

[And I saw a large ginger-haired man coming from the lake]

Most of the descriptions are introduced by the verb *gweld* (“to see”); the character’s name is not mentioned; a brief description of the character’s garment is sometimes given, following the same pattern—

gwisc o bali amdanaw	[a garment of brocaded silk about him]
gwisc o urethyn . . . amdanaw	[a garment of cloth . . . about him]

—and reference is made to hair color without using the noun *gwallt* (“hair”) at all. Although there are only a few (7) short descriptions in the *Four Branches*, yet the common elements suggest the existence of a particular convention when describing physical appearance. Indeed, the same type of simple description can be seen throughout the tales of the *Mabinogion*. One feature that becomes apparent is that every description has been structured in a particular way: formulas, or rather short formulaic units, are combined, containing a noun + descriptive element (an adjective/adjectives or *o* [“of”] + material of garment). These formulaic descriptions found in the *Four Branches* are therefore examples of a technique that was used extensively. When we examine the *Mabinogion* tales in general, we find that the narrators adhere to a particular order: the type of character, e.g. lady, nobleman; hair color + age/size; additional adjectives, e.g. “princely,” “handsome”; garment; footwear. Not every stage is included in each description. We therefore find other authors building on the simple descriptions found in the *Four Branches*, that is, increasing the formulaic

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<sup>6</sup> See Davies 1988a for a detailed analysis of descriptions of physical appearance in the *Mabinogion* corpus.



units to create a fuller picture. The author of the *Dream of Rhonabwy*, at first sight, seems to have moved away from the formulaic patterns when describing people; however, a close analysis shows that he is creating within the tradition (Davies 1988a; Bollard 1980-81).

## COMBAT

*Pwyll* is the only branch to employ a combat formula (6):

And thereupon the two kings approached each other towards the middle of the ford for the encounter. And at the first onset the man who was in Arawn's place struck Hafgan on the centre of his shield's boss, so that it was split in two and all his armour broken, and Hafgan was his arm and his spear's length over his horse's crupper to the ground, with a mortal wound upon him.

There are four components to this formula: the *gossod* ("attack"); the place of attack; the result of the attack on the enemy's arms; the result on the enemy himself. This formula is used extensively in *Gereint*; much detail is omitted in *Peredur* and *Owein*, although the basic pattern is visible and key words repeated.

## TRANSITION

It has already been observed that in oral narrative great care is taken to cover the transition from one period to the next. When attempting to outline the action from one day to the next, formulaic units are combined in the *Four Branches*. There are three stages here: *treulaw / dilit* ("spend" / "follow") ; *cysgu* ("sleep"); *trannoeth* ("the following day"). There are six examples in *Pwyll*, three in *Branwen*, five in *Math*, but not one in *Manawydan*. Note two examples (16, 26):

They ate and caroused and time came to go to sleep. And Pwyll and Rhiannon went to the chamber, and spent that night in pleasure and contentment. And early the following day . . .

They continued to carouse and converse that night, while it pleased them. And when they perceived that it was better to go to sleep than to continue the carousal, to sleep they went. . . . And that night Matholwch slept with Branwen. And the following day all the host of the court arose . . .

This variable formula in its fullest form is also used in *Gereint*, while in *Peredur* and *Owein* the author combines only the “going to sleep” and the “tomorrow” elements. The other four tales do not use the time-lapse formula at all—the events in the *Dream of Rhonaby* occur within the space of one day; in the *Dream of Maxen* the time lapse is much longer—one year, seven years; in *Culhwch and Olwen* the episodes are complete units in themselves—different characters appear in many of the episodes so that continuity is not preserved by following the adventures of one hero as in the Romances and the *Four Branches*.

## FEASTING

Sometimes a further formula precedes the time-lapse formula, describing the welcome, preparation, and seating arrangements at table. In this context units are combined yet again to express (a) the welcome and preparation; (b) sitting at table; (c) the seating arrangements; (d) the beginning of the feasting. The same basic structure is again found in all examples (26):

At Aberffraw they began the feast and sat down. This is how they sat: the king of the Island of the Mighty, and Manawydan son of Llŷr on one side of him, and Matholwch on the other side, and Branwen daughter of Llŷr next to him. . . . And they began the carousal.

Although the units in this formula are not verbatim, key words are employed during each stage of events, giving the impression of familiarity. This formula is found in its fullest form in the *Four Branches*, although examples do also occur in the Romances.

## APPROACH TO A BUILDING

Lastly in this first category of variable formulas, formulaic units are combined when describing an approach to a building. Each description is preceded by the verb *gweld*, that is, the listener sees everything through the eyes of the protagonist. It is interesting to note the use made of detailing or precise focusing, for example (47):

And with that word, out she went, and in the direction he told her the man and the fort were, thither she proceeded. She saw the gate of the fort open . . . and in she came. And as soon as she came, she saw . . . .

W. Evans (1960:109, 143-47) refers to this as the observing eye technique, while Roberts (1984:218) compares it to a television camera panning and finally centering on the significant object or person. Rosenberg notes the importance of the natural chronological pattern in relation to the memory and oral performance (1990:154):

Memory also exerts pressure on the sequence of clauses within a sentence. Clauses tend to be generated chronologically, matching their sequence to the sequence of the sentences describing them.

Such a technique is also apparent in modern Welsh oral storytelling.<sup>7</sup> This formula is exploited to the full in *Peredur*, the key words being “made for / came to the court,” “open door,” “when he came,” “made for the hall.” The formula also occurs in the *Dream of Maxen* and the *Dream of Rhonabwy*.

I would argue, therefore, that authors combine formulaic units to make a variable formula, thereby creating a longer descriptive passage. Although these formulas are not repeated verbatim, identity is established by a repeated structural pattern and by the repetition of key words. There is another type of variable formula, where a number of formulaic units are not combined. Instead, there is only one verbal pattern, and a clear structure within that. These variable formulas are therefore much shorter than the ones previously discussed.

## OPENING

Three of the four branches begin in the same way, with the name of a lord, the name of his land, and the location of the lord at that particular time. Before the last element there is a “time” phrase which focuses the attention on a particular event (3, 25, 55):

Pwyll, prince of Dyfed was lord over the seven cantrefs of Dyfed; and once upon a time he was at Arberth, a chief court of his . . . .

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Welsh Folk Museum Tape 1297.

Bendigeidfran son of Llŷr was crowned king over this Island and exalted with the crown of London. And one afternoon he was at Harlech in Ardudwy, at a court of his . . . .

Math son of Mathonwy was lord over Gwynedd . . . one day . . . .

A similar opening formula is found in the other *Mabinogion* tales (155, 79):

The emperor Arthur was at Caer Llion on Usk. He was sitting one day . . . .

Macsen Wledig was Emperor of Rome . . . and one day . . . .

Very often the opening formula will be employed to begin a new episode in the middle of a story.

## CLOSING

Each branch ends with the same formula: “and thus ends this branch of the Mabinogi” (24, 40, 54, 75). In *Manawydan*, however, a phrase precedes this formula: “And because of that imprisonment that tale was called Mabinogi Mynweir a Mynord” (54). This is another type of closing formula, seen at the end of other tales (152, 182):

And this story is called the Dream of Rhonabwy.

And this tale is called the tale of the Lady of the Fountain.

The title of the tale is therefore sometimes incorporated into the closing formula.<sup>8</sup> It would appear that there was a set way of opening and closing a narrative—by using a variable formula that was changed according to the pattern and details of each particular tale.

## TAKING COUNSEL

Variable formulas are also adopted when taking counsel, that is, when the king or leader calls upon his counselors and asks for their advice: “Immediately the following day they took counsel. What was determined

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of titles in the *Mabinogion*, see Davies 1990.

in counsel was . . .” (26). Examples of this formula are also to be found in the other tales of the *Mabinogion*. As with all formulas, of course, their existence in a text depends on whether the content calls for such a formula.

## HORSES

Finally, a variable formula consisting of one verbal pattern is employed when introducing a horse into the narrative: *ef a welei uarchawc y ar . . .* (“he saw a rider on . . .”). There are only two examples in the *Four Branches*, and both are in *Pwyll*; for example (I. Williams 1930:9, Jones and Jones 1949:9):

wynt a welynt gwreic ar uarch canwelw mawr aruchel, a gwise eureit  
llathreit o bali amdanei

[they saw a lady on a big fine pale white horse, with a garment of shining  
gold brocaded silk upon her]

Note that the formula describing her dress follows immediately. It is impossible to draw any conclusions from only two examples; however, this formula is used extensively in the three Romances, especially in *Gereint*. What is particularly interesting about these descriptions is the string of adjectives employed to describe the horse—compound adjectives, very often alliterative, and rhythmical (Goetinck 1976:59, Jones and Jones 1949:219):

y ar palfrei gloywdu, ffroenuoll, ymdeithic, a rygig wastatualch, escutlym,  
ditramgwyd ganthaw

[on a gleaming-black, wide-nostrilled, easy-paced palfrey, of proud and  
even tread, fast-stepping and unfaltering]

For another example (J. Evans 1907:211, Jones and Jones 1949:254):

y ar cadueirch cadarndeu eskyrnbraf meswehyn froenuolldrud

[on chargers strong, thickset big-boned, ground-devouring, wide-nostrilled  
and mettled]

The rhythmical quality arises from the adjectives—two syllables, often three with a central stressed syllable flanked by unstressed syllables (Roberts

1984:219). This implies movement, excitement, and is without a doubt an important aural feature of the tales.

### *Doublets*

The third type of formula seen in the *Four Branches* and in the *Mabinogion* tales in general is the doublet, a combination of two words that are to all intents synonymous and very often bound together by alliteration. Many doublets in the *Four Branches* also occur in the other tales, e.g. *tir a dayar* ("earth and land"); *y gyuoeth ac y wlat* ("his land and country"); *hut a lledrith* ("magic and enchantment"). There are also numerous doublets that occur only once; even if one cannot prove that they are part of the traditional system, in all probability they do reflect an attempt on the part of the narrators to adapt traditional techniques to suit their favored mode of expression.

### **Conclusion**

Having examined the evidence offered by the *Four Branches*, and having briefly and rather superficially drawn comparisons with the other tales of the *Mabinogion* corpus, I should like to argue that the narrators have been greatly influenced by the oral storytelling techniques of the medieval *cyfarwyddiaid*. A brief survey of the data in the Welsh Folk Museum shows that a chronological order and an additive style are characteristic of oral storytellers. Dialogue, too, plays a very important part in their narrative, together with speech markers. These are features, of course, that many scholars have shown to be characteristic of oral texts. I should also like to argue that the medieval Welsh narrators were drawing on a stock of traditional verbal patterns or formulas that were familiar to them, and that these formulas also derive from an oral style. This is not to say that the tales were composed orally, rather that they have been influenced by the stylistic methods of oral storytellers.

I have chosen here to concentrate on three features only—many other stylistic techniques need to be examined, and all the tales analyzed and rigorously compared before we can say anything meaningful about storytelling in medieval Wales. Much research remains to be done on the actual relationship between orality and literacy in medieval Wales; the boundaries between oral and literate cultures are difficult and perhaps

impossible to identify. This is highlighted in an episode in *Branwen*, the second branch of the *Mabinogi* (Jones and Jones 1949:32). Branwen is mistreated on her return to Ireland; she rears a starling, teaches it language, and instructs the bird what manner of man is her brother, the king of the Island of the Mighty. She ties a letter to the bird's wings and sends it off to Wales to seek her brother. Perhaps the two boundaries touch here; in an oral culture, the starling, having been taught words, would surely have delivered the message by mouth; in a literate culture spoken words are not enough—the message has to be written down. When Branwen's brother receives the letter, it is read out loud to him—even in a literate culture, the aural has its place.<sup>9</sup>

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