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# The Poet and the Prince: A Culture of Honor in Middle Welsh Panegyric Poetry

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*Previous discussions of panegyric poetry focus on its essentially fictional nature and consider it unreliable as historical evidence. This essay presents a new paradigm for the evaluation of panegyric evidence to form significant conclusions about contemporary cultural expectations and self-perception in an honor/shame culture. This essay uses specific evidence drawn from twelfth and thirteenth-century Welsh panegyric poetry to provide a specific implementation of the paradigm.*

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The immediate reaction to medieval praise-poetry or panegyric is understandably one of doubt, based on its existence as an essentially hyperbolic form of literature. This has led many—including such well-known names as Gibbons, Voltaire, and Dryden<sup>1</sup>—to reject its use in a historical context. While more recent arguments, such as those of Richard W. Kaeuper,<sup>2</sup> have established a clear standard for the historical interpretation of essentially fictive medieval genres, such as the *chanson de geste*, no such convincing argument has been made for the quasi-mimetic genre of panegyric. C. Stephen Jaeger made an attempt in his “Courtliness and Social Change,” writing that “the panegyrist’s extravagant praise may well be intended to oppose the vices of a notoriously vicious king by fulsome praise of what he lacked. He was prodding and stinging the king by false praise, pushing him to change, and if the rest of the court heard it, so much greater the power of its irony to push him toward reform.”<sup>3</sup> This raises two troubling questions. The first is a question of authorship: Can we, in fact, differentiate the Welsh poet and the Welsh prince between whom Jaeger assumes to exist a corrective agenda? The second is a question of

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of some of these later authors and perceptions of Roman, medieval or Early Modern panegyric, see James D. Garrison, “Gibbon and the ‘Treacherous Language of Panegyrics,’” *Eighteenth Century Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1977), vol. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Richard W. Kaeuper, “Literature as Essential Evidence for Understanding Chivalry,” in *The Journal of Medieval Military History*, ed. Clifford J. Rogers, Kelly deVries and John France (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2007), vol. 4.

<sup>3</sup> C. Stephen Jaeger, “Courtliness and Social Change,” in *Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courty Ideals, 939-1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p. 296.

oral-formulaic interpretation: Could the Welsh poet, in working within a rigidly defined and regulated genre conform to cultural expectations while manipulating his material obviously enough to provoke a reaction? I will suggest otherwise. As I will demonstrate, Welsh panegyric was both produced and consumed by the same social class, and in many cases by the same individual. Furthermore, panegyric was an essentially oral-formulaic tradition, in which the selection and manner of attributes to be praised has little if anything to do with the individual described. In an honor society, the assertion of conformance – either by an individual or another on his behalf – is just as important as the conformance itself. Jaeger's error is to assume an individual correlation for a genre that is clearly performative in nature and thus much more a collective expression. Thus, Middle Welsh panegyric poetry served simultaneously to establish and regulate social standards for the warrior aristocracy. In this essay, I will discuss the historical importance of panegyric poetry as a performative act, representing a component of a lord's self-perception. I will limit myself, for the sake of time and for the sake of presenting a clear picture, to the poetry of the age of the Gogynfeirdd or not-so-early poets (about 1100 to 1282), representing the strongest tradition of patronage of poetry and a period of increased Welsh political independence.

The noted historian of the American South Bertram Wyatt-Brown dedicated a chapter of his seminal *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* to demonstrating and then defining a theory of personal honor outside of any particular geopolitical context. According to Wyatt-Brown, honor is comprised of three basic components:

- 1) The inner conviction of self-worth
- 2) The claim of that self-assessment before the public
- 3) The assessment of that claim by the public

Thus honor “resides in the individual as his understanding of who he is and where he belongs in the ordered ranks of society [...] both internal to the claimant, so that it motivates him toward behavior

socially approved, and external to him, because only by the response of observers can he ordinarily understand himself. The internal and external aspects of honor are inalienably connected because honor serves as ethical mediator between the individual and the community by which he is assessed and in which he must also locate himself in relation to others.”<sup>4</sup>

He further highlights the “accepted congruence between personal values and the conventions imposed upon the individual by society. The internal man and the external realities of existence are united in such a way that he knows no other good or evil except that which the collective group designates. He reflects society as society reflects him.”<sup>5</sup> The performative speech act of asserting one's conformance to social standards before peers is thus the crucial part of establishing self-perception. Yet the speech act did not have to be made by the asserting individual, although in many cases it was. The patronage of poets and resulting production of panegyric serves as just as clear – and perhaps even more memorable – a demonstration of one's conformance to social standards.

But are we to suppose, as Jaeger does, that the poets are a distinct group from the princes they praise, and thus the poets are essentially detached from the class whose standards they are asserting, ironically or otherwise? Certainly the Welsh laws provide for the distinct status of a poet or bard within the structure of the court. The *pencerdd* or court-bard had a distinct position at table, received customary remunerations from his patron, and was entitled to a share of several taxes and fees and ultimately receive land.<sup>6</sup> The poet was required by law to be a freeman, and to receive the permission of his lord.<sup>7</sup> While these laws are clearly idealized in many aspects, they show nevertheless that a poet, in the Welsh mind, was tied inextricably to the code of social conduct that also governed the military aristocracy. Many poets were in fact also warriors. Gwalchmai ap Meilyr writes of his own prowess in

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<sup>4</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> For a complete discussion of the privileges of the court-bard and the Chief of Song see Thomas Peter Ellis, *Welsh Tribal Law and Custom in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), p. 198.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

battle alongside that of his lord's: "Gleaming my sword, lightning its fashion in conflict, glittering the gold on my warshield ... For Môn's prince I attacked in battle."<sup>8</sup> Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr boasts that "On Bryn Actun's field I honoured a hundred, my red blade at my side; In one ebb, three hundred war-lords: May they enter heaven as one."<sup>9</sup> Most significantly, there are two known poets in this period, Owain Cyfeliog and Hywel ap Owain Gwynedd, who are themselves lords, changing the perspective of the panegyric utterly on its head: "Fine men I sent into battle, fearless in combat, red-weaponed. Who vexes a brave man, let him beware!"<sup>10</sup> Thus poets often (1) held land from their lord (2) fought in their lord's warband and (3) thus wrote poetry that governed not just their lord's place in society but their own. Or, to paraphrase Dr. Kaeuper, we know that uchelwyr (nobility) read or heard panegyric and heroic poetry; they mention traditional themes in their own writings; they inserted their own ideas into poetry and drew them from poetry; they patronized the writing of poetry and some – in this case, many – wrote poetry themselves.<sup>11</sup> The audience and authorship of this panegyric are thus demonstrated to be coterminous.

The formulaic structure of Welsh panegyric is clear from the enormous amount of thematic repetition. The poets praise military prowess: Compare Gwalchmai ap Meilyr, praising Owain Gwynedd: "Môn's war-lord, how brave his behavior in combat, and their bold defiance was battle's clamour, and before him rose a grim wild welter, and havoc and conflict and doleful death,"<sup>12</sup> with Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr's poem about Madawg ap Maredudd: "Mighty Madawg, battlefield's champion ... Keen for war, for fortress, for splendid field ... Famed his bloodstained hand on bloodstained field."<sup>13</sup> Almost as often and perhaps closer to the heart of the poet, they praise generosity; with an echo, perhaps, of the role of the

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph P. Clancy, trans. *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 124-125.

<sup>9</sup> Clancy, p. 145. Even if we reject their claims to participation in war as literary self-promotion, we can still form conclusions based on their willingness – even eagerness – to identify with the warrior class they praise.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> Richard W. Kaeuper, "Literature as Essential Evidence for Understanding Chivalry," in *The Journal of Medieval Military History*, ed. Clifford J. Rogers, Kelly deVries and John France (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2007), vol. 4, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Clancy, p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

lord in rewarding a poet for a performance. To Gruffydd ap Gwrgerau, Gruffydd ap Cynan is “triumph's red spear ... who gave me gold and well-trained horses.” Prydydd y Moch is even more direct, addressing Davydd ap Owain Gwynedd with “Mordaf, Nudd, Rhydderch, for giving. Superb ruler, restraining the strong. Pour out wealth to me for praising you, pourer of golden favor, Rhodri's descendant.”<sup>14</sup> Mordaf, Nudd and Rhydderch are three semi-legendary figures from North Britain, all of whom share the epithet of Hael, meaning “generous.”

The poets also constantly praise genealogy. Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (Llywelyn I of Wales) is noted as “Rhun's descendant,”<sup>15</sup> and Bleddyn Fardd mentions Llywelyn II's great-grandfather Owain Gwynedd and his ultimate descent from Beli, one of several common mythical Brittonic ancestors.<sup>16</sup> Gwalchmai ap Meilyr goes so far as to announce that Owain Gwynedd is descended from Aeneas,<sup>17</sup> and if that seems surprising, consider the author of the medieval *Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan* (Owain Gwynedd's father) who asserts quite seriously that his patron was indeed descended – with trips through most of Britain's mythic past, including the Coeling dynasty of northern Britain, Brutus of Troy, Aeneas and Anchises, Zeus, Saturn, and a succession of Greek islands – from Japhet, Noah, Methuselah and ultimately Adam, son of God.<sup>18</sup> Yet the same text – in fact, the same page – reveals the reason for this preoccupation; Gruffydd's mother was Ragnallt, daughter of Olaf – a Danish princess from Viking Ireland. For a dynasty recently established, the need to assert their genealogy – and thus their legitimacy – causes panegyric to take on not an individually corrective role but a broadly social one – correcting perceptions of society to fit that which is expected. It doesn't matter if it's true or not.

The poet's role is thus to utilize the orality of the poem to make an assertion regarding his lord's

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<sup>14</sup> Clancy, *Poems*, p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> Clancy, p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> For Beli, Rhun, Urien, Owain or any of the other semi-legendary figures in Welsh genealogies, see *Bonhedd y Gwyr y Gogledd*, appendix to Rachel Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Clancy, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Russell, ed. *Vita Griffini Filii Conani: The Medieval Latin Life of Gruffydd ap Cynan* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005) p. 53-55.

conformance to social standards. The act is an essentially performative one, 'performed' by convention before the court and composed out of an oral-formulaic tradition that stretched back centuries. Kenneth Jackson famously wrote that "Celtic poetry was composed in the head and without the use of writing; was recited orally to the assembled company in the chief's hall; and was handed down orally ... all this was fostered and practised by the institution of 'bardic schools' in which budding poets were given an elaborate training in their profession."<sup>19</sup> The existence of a bardic school or tradition stretching back centuries is debated, most notably by Evans, who writes that "one of the more serious [difficulties with popular views] is their often-stated insistence on projecting the apparatus of Welsh 'bardic schools' – their poetic training, compositions, and so on – back ... The poetic traditions of [the Gogynfeirdd] ... will bear only a slight resemblance to those of [earlier poets]."<sup>20</sup> It may very well be that such a formal institution of "bardic schools" never existed as such, as although some later survivals have attested to their existence, there is no early evidence other than the provisions in the Welsh laws previously discussed. However, the oral-formulaic transmission of this poetry and its assorted tropes, figures and devices is clear and cannot be dismissed. In fact, many of the themes previously discussed are just as present in earlier poetry. Compare Aneirin's praise of Cynon: "Jewel-decked lord ... whoever he'd strike was not struck again. Sharp-pointed his spears, shield in pieces, he'd bore through war-hosts ... On the day of battle his blades were deadly,"<sup>21</sup> to the Gogynfeirdd's praise of prowess. Or Taliesin's assertion that "Urien will not spurn me. Llwyfenydd's land, mine are their riches. Mine is their good will, mine their generosity ... from the best of kings, most generous I've heard of," to Prydydd y Moch's demand for monetary reward. And although these poems are chronologically much closer to the historical figures whose genealogy is so prized in Wales, we see such praise-worthy connections as "Urien's nephew,"<sup>22</sup> or

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<sup>19</sup> Kenneth H. Jackson, *The Gododdin* (Edinburgh, 1969), 9, n.1 and 24. See discussion in J. E. Caerwyn Williams, *The Court Poet in Medieval Wales: An Essay* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen S. Evans, *The Heroic Poetry of Dark-Age Britain* (University Press of America, 2002), p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> Clancy, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> Clancy, p. 86.

“Cyndrwyn's son.”<sup>23</sup> In fact, given the later use of the same names – and the same traditions – in Gogynfeirdd poetry (a full list of which would require a book) it is clear that there is a continuing tradition, not just of names or events but also of social expectations and 'correct' praise for a lord. Is that to say, then, that there is some authoritative handbook which a poet could consult for the proper oral-formulaic tropes to describe his lord? Well, yes. There was a movement in medieval Wales in this period and later to codify and define the role of the poet; to set out the proper subjects for a poet to eulogize and to establish precisely the manner of his description, which resulted in a series of poetic grammars, which are largely ignored except as categories of poetic forms and have never been translated into English. In the last and most elaborate, that of Einion Offeiriad, we find: “A baron is praised for strength and prowess, and might, and power, and loyalty towards his lord, and wisdom, and discretion, and generosity, and agreeableness, and beauty of body, and good breeding, and other commendable things.”<sup>24</sup> Prowess, generosity, descent. Of course, a poet would not have to have been familiar with these manuscripts in order to write poetry that conformed to their standards; they are clearly a production, not a producer, of the oral-formulaic tradition of Welsh panegyric. But they are clear proof that panegyric is written not to praise particular aspects of an individual but to make specific, formulaic claims on his behalf.

Thus Welsh praise-poetry satisfies the active obligation in Wyatt-Brown's theory of honor, as a performative act in which a warrior-aristocrat asserts his fulfillment of society's standards for him. Thus, he understands his position in society – in an honor culture, his identity – as intrinsically linked with his identity as a ruler and as a member of the class described in the poetry. Much has been made of the apparently naïve Welsh fear of poetic satire echoed throughout Middle Welsh literature, like Kilhwch's threat to satirize Arthur's court in the *Mabinogion*, for example, or Taliesin's confounding of the bards in

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<sup>23</sup> Clancy, p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Anne T. E. Matonis, “Traditions of Panegyric in Welsh Poetry: The Heroic and the Chivalric” in *Speculum* (Medieval Academy of America, 1978), vol. 53 no. 4, footnote to p. 668.



Ystoria Taliesin. Perhaps this seems less naïve if we appreciate the power of satire to destroy the link between self-perception and public perception and thus to systematically destroy a lord's identity. An assertion of a lord's failure to meet social standards, thus, has great potency as a threat in an honor culture. This and other issues, especially the significance of the particularly Welsh brand of piety and Christianity and the entire sub-genre of religious panegyric, I wish I had had the time to address. But I will consider this essay successful if it has in some way provided a systematic framework for considering panegyric from a social and historical viewpoint.

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