

## *Brenhin uu.* Reading the death of kings in *Culhwch ac Olwen*

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**ABSTRACT:** The medieval Welsh tale *Culhwch ac Olwen* has usually been regarded as a romp, full of slapstick humour, and irony. The darker elements of the tale have largely been ignored. This paper argues that for a proper appreciation of the tale its darker sub-text has to be acknowledged: not only does it sharpen the humour, but it allows us to view the depiction of Arthur in a darker light; for all his pomp and glory, he, too, will fall.

**KEYWORDS:** Arthur, *Culhwch ac Olwen*, Gorau ap Custennin, humour, irony, the Oldest Animals, parody, Ysbaddaden Bencawr, Wrnach Gawr

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings;  
How some have been deposed; some slain in war ...  
*Richard II*, III. ii

The prevailing view of the medieval Welsh tale *Culhwch ac Olwen* (CO) is that of a glorious romp:<sup>1</sup>

Primitive and rather slapstick humour appears ... Burlesque elements rear throughout the Arthurian Court list, and irony is never absent, including ironic understatement ... (Bromwich & Evans 1992: lxxii)

Its chief literary characteristic is its humorous light-heartedness, and one major element of that is its exuberant extravagance ... much of the humour – incongruous exaggeration, verbal virtuosity and knockabout slapstick. ... The directness of action, literary playfulness and childlike lack of

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<sup>1</sup> An early version of this paper was given at the CSANA conference in Toronto in 2013. I am grateful to those present for useful comments and discussion, and to the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions for improvement.

responsibility shown in this episode (sc. the death of Culhwch's mother and the killing of Doged) all recur throughout the tale ... (Padel 2000: 18–19; cf. also 24: 'carefree escapist atmosphere').

There are occasional notes of something else: 'the grave dignity of the oldest animals' (Padel 2000: 22); the death of Ysbaddaden 'seems to provide a more thoughtful note on which to end the tale' (Padel 2000: 22).<sup>2</sup> But generally there is a focus in the literary scholarship on the humour and satire, on the folkloristic elements of the tale, on the pigs, the boars, and the porcine onomastics.<sup>3</sup> While none of that is deniable, it is also worth thinking about the sharpness and the edge of the humour and where it comes from. It is the contention of what follows that the pointedness of CO is brought out by an unobtrusive and often implicit contrast with a darker side to the tale.

It cannot, for example, have escaped any reader's notice that, however entertaining and amusing the tale might be, the body-count is very high. Moreover, royal, and, more generally, lordly, characters do not have a high life-expectancy. The narrative is book-ended by royal deaths, chilling and cold-blooded in their execution and interestingly similar in their structure. When Cilydd's wife, mother of Culhwch, dies, and the *ysgolheic* inevitably fails to keep up with the weeding in the churchyard, urged on by his advisors, Cilydd's mind turns to the matter of a new wife:

Ac mal y gwelas mynet a oruc y brenhin yg kyghor kwt gaffei wreic.  
Amkawd un o'r kyghorwyr, 'Mi a wydwn wreica<sup>4</sup> da it a wedei. Sef yw honno gwreic Doget Urenhin'. Kyghor uu ganthunt y chyrchu.<sup>5</sup> A llad y brenhin a dwyn y wreic atref ganthu a orugant ac un uerch a oed idi gyd a hi. A gwereskyn tir y brenhin a wnaethant (adapted from CO 28–33).

And as he saw it he took counsel as to where he could get a wife. One of the counsellors said, 'I know of a good marriage for you which would be fitting. That is the wife of King Doged'. They decided to seek her out. And they killed the king and brought his wife back home with them, together with her

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<sup>2</sup> Zimmer 2017: 583 also notes of Arthur that he is 'far away from the ideal king of later romance' and 'possessing all the positive and negative characteristics of a Dark Age warband leader', but takes these observations no further. I am grateful to Joe Eska for drawing my attention to this paper.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jackson 1964–1965: 92–94 & 1982, Henry 1968, Edel 1980 & 1983, Radner 1988, Roberts 1991, Hunter 1991, etc. I am not concerned here with issues of dating and nothing which follows will affect that debate; for discussion, see Rodway 2005, Charles-Edwards 2010, and, for a reply, Rodway 2013: 19–34.

<sup>4</sup> I retain the reading of the manuscripts here, and have adjusted the translation accordingly.

<sup>5</sup> The semantics of *cyrchu* would allow for this to be a more violent approach than the translation suggests (cf. GPC s.v. *cyrchaf*).

only daughter. And they took possession of the king's land (adapted after Davies 2007: 179).

In four laconic, merciless clauses he acquires, as his new wife, the former *gwreic Doget Urenhin*, and another tract of territory into the bargain. Similarly, at the end of the tale, Ysbaddaden is shaved bloodily with the instruments acquired in the hunt of the *Twrch* (nicely mirroring the trimming of Culhwch's hair by Arthur at the beginning) and then Gorau ap Custennin does the honours:

Ac yna yd ymauaelawd Goreu mab Custennin yndaw herwyd gwallt y penn,  
a'e lusgaw yn y ol y'r dom, a llad y penn a'e doddi ar bawl y gatlys. A goresgyn  
y gaer a oruc a'e gyuoeth (CO 1230–1242).

And then Gorau son of Custennin grabbed him by the hair and dragged him to the mound and cut off his head and stuck it on the bailey post. And he took possession of his fort and his territory (Davies 2007: 213).

As is noted by Bromwich, Gorau seems to act as a doublet for Culhwch (Bromwich & Evans 1992: xxx–xxxii; Bromwich 2014: 364): Ysbaddaden had deposed his brother Custennin and this, we are to understand, is why it is Gorau who executes him and exhibits his head on a stake (as befitted those who attempted to usurp legitimate royal power). In this context, and with the marriage of Culhwch and Olwen which follows immediately, Gorau is literally the 'best' man. In both cases, the death of a king yields material reward for the victor, the acquisition of land and plunder, marked in both cases by the legally loaded term *gweresgyn* (White Book) / *goresgyn* (Red Book), which seems to mean the de facto taking of possession or occupation of land in legal texts, but in literary texts it involves the taking of land 'commonly by force or with the threat of force, not by legal process' (Walters 1984: 115–118). Between these two examples of cold Realpolitik, we have another pair of contrasting episodes. Culhwch's spectacular entrance into Arthur's court is justly seen as one of the set-pieces of the tale, but its companion piece is also worth attention. One of the tasks required by Ysbaddaden is the acquisition of the sword of Wrnach Gawr, another giant who meets a gory end in CO. Strikingly, Wrnach keeps the same pattern of household as Arthur, even down to the garrulous and argumentative gate-keeper (CO 759–824), the same legalistic rules of entrance (no one being allowed in unless they have a skill), and so on. Cai and his men talk their way in and Wrnach meets his end through Cai's trickery. Inevitably, they plunder the castle and take what they desire of his treasure (*diffeithaw y gaer a dwyn a vynassant o tlysseu* (CO 821–822)). Apart from getting the sword, the episode also allows Gorau ap Custennin to come of age and acquire his name. We see here a narrative which ends in destruction and plunder (as befalls Ysbaddaden), but structurally the entrance of

Cai and his men into Wrnach's fortress is very similar to that of Culhwch into Arthur's court. The difference lies in the outcome, and we are left with the nagging thought that in other circumstances Arthur's court might end like this.

Finally, in what seems to be a deliberate downplaying of their status (very much phrased as 'Oh, and by the way'), in the rush and tumult of the hunt, the Twrch kills *Gwilenhin brenhin Ffreinc* (CO 1130) and *Hir Peissawc brenhin Llydaw* (CO 1163–1164).

Arthur himself, of course, in all of this survives unscathed, but what I want to suggest is that our perception of Arthur should perhaps be coloured by the darker sub-text underlying the quasi-imperial splendour of his court and the romp of the hunt. Arguably, we are meant to read into this that all is not well and nothing lasts, and even when Arthur is at the height of his powers, there are hints throughout the text of what is to come.

We do not only have 'sad stories of the death of kings': some are indeed 'deposed', such as Custennin by his own brother, Ysbaddaden (CO 435–436), although it is unclear why; the tale explains it as having to do with his wife: *am uym priawd y'm ryamdiuwynwys Yspydaden Penkawr* 'and because of my wife my brother Ysbaddaden Bencawr has ruined me' (CO 435–436), but no more is said. But, given Custennin's wife's unhappiness, something has been going on here. Furthermore, in addition to deposition, or perhaps as a variant on it, a number of rulers in CO have been transformed into animals by God, usually for their sin (*pechawd*). The most obvious of these is, of course, Twrch Trwyth, whose patronym *mab Tared Wledic* (CO 670) has already indicated his royal origins even before we are briefly offered his back-story:

Gouynnwys y gwyr y Arthur peth oed ystyr yr hwch hwnnw. Y dywawt ynteu, 'Brenhin uu, ac am y bechawt y rithwys Duw ef yn hwch' (CO 1074–1076).

The men asked Arthur the history of that swine. He said, 'He was a king, and for his sins God changed him into a swine' (Davies 2007: 209).

As so often in CO, other stories are being alluded to tangentially; it is tempting to think that such animal transformation follows the pattern of *Math* and that it is a punishment for sexual transgression, but that is by no means necessary; we simply do not know the story. Likewise, the transformation of Nyniaw and Peibiaw, who were turned into oxen for their sins (CO 598–600; trans. Davies 2007: 195), may well be another case of punishment being visited upon high-status individuals; certainly, their genealogies point to that (Bartrum 1966: 45 §§9–10), but, again, within the narrative of CO we are not told. Similarly, the implication of the story of the bitch and whelps of Rhymhi whom God transformed back into humans (CO 930–941; trans. Davies 2007: 205) is that God (for whatever reason) had turned them into wolves originally, presumably for some *pechawd*.

Royal characters in CO seem, then, to be particularly vulnerable to death, deposition, or transformation. But where does that leave Arthur, who largely glides through the tale unscathed despite the mayhem around him? While Arthur seems fine for the moment, the seeds of his own destruction, it would appear, have already been sown. We may take two instances: references to the battle of Camlan in the list of guarantors, and Arthur's disintegrating relationship with Cai.

The long list of guarantors in CO has received a mixed reception (Edel 1982–1983; Bromwich & Evans 1992: xxxiv–xlvi). But one striking feature of the list is the way in which it manages quietly to build future reference into a narrative set in the past. This is particularly noticeable in the references to individuals involved in the battle of Camlan to come (Bromwich 2014: 167–169). Now, it is reasonable enough for the audience to assume that there might be people in this list who might, in the future, figure at Camlan and perhaps not survive, but our attention is very pointedly drawn to characters whose involvement in the battle was particularly problematic, not least because they survived when Arthur did not. At a point where the audience is basking in the reflected glory of Arthur's court, when we have just been reminded of the extent of an empire depicted as being of Alexandrian proportions, it is striking enough that the tale should seek to remind us of Camlan, but it also goes further to remind us of the nine plotters of Camlan:

Gwynn Hyuar maer Kernyw a Dyfneint — nawuet a estoues Cat Gamlan (CO 296–297)

Gwyn Hyfar, overseer of Cornwall and Devon, one of the nine who plotted the battle of Camlan (Davies 2007: 187).

In naming Gwyn Hyfar as *nawuet*, the audience would have been set to thinking about the other eight; one that might occur to them is Iddog Cordd Prydain mentioned in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* (BRh 5.11) where the same verb and metaphor are used (GPC s.v. *ystofaf*; Bromwich 2014: 167–169). More importantly, though, given the disaster of Camlan, the list of guarantors contains a reference to a triad, *y trydygwr a dienghis o Gamlan* 'the three men who escaped from Camlan', which could only remind the audience of the many who did not, including, of course, Arthur:

a Moruran eil Tegit — ny dodes dyn y araf yndaw yGhamlan rac y haccred, pawb a tybygynt y uod yn gythreul canhorthwy; blew a oed arnaw mal blew hyd. A Sande Pryt Angel — ny dodes neb y wayw yndaw yGhamlan rac y decket, pawb a debygynt y uod yn engyl canhorthwy. A Chynwyl Sant — y trydygwr a dienghis o Gamlan; ef a yscarwys diwethaf ac Arthur y ar Hengroen y uarch (CO 225–232).

and Morfran son of Tegid (no man laid his weapon in him at Camlan because he was so ugly, everyone thought he was an attendant demon; he had hair on him like a stag). And Sandde Pryd Angel (no one laid his spear in him at Camlan because he was so beautiful, everyone thought he was an attendant angel). And Cynwyl Sant, one of the Three Who Escaped from Camlan; he was the last to part from Arthur, on Hengroen his horse (Davies 2007: 185).

The scholarship on CO has not been kind to this triad; Rachel Bromwich, one of the few to mention it, took the view that it was ‘a burlesque invention by the narrator of the story, a parody of TYP whose spirit is entirely in keeping with the jocular treatment given throughout to the list of the company at Arthur’s court’ (2014: lxxvi; cf. also 168); it is described also as ‘a farcical invention’ (Bromwich & Evans 1992: 84–85). Despite the fact (or perhaps because of the fact) that one was thought to be a demon and another an angel, it is less obvious to me, as will be clear from the discussion so far, that we need to think of this as jocular. Certainly, some parts of the list of guarantors are intended to be humorous (in this vein, Edel 1982–1983: 262 & 266), parodying, for example, the way names are formed, but not everything needs to be considered as mono-thematically ‘jocular’. The structure of this triad should also attract our attention: it does not begin in the usual fashion of a triad, ‘the three Xes who ...’, but rather the connection between them is left unspoken until the third individual is named, and he is explicitly associated with Arthur. The effect of this is to imprint Camlan in the minds of the audience, but only to bring Arthur into the picture when he is defeated (and presumably dying); the last image is of the aftermath of Camlan. There is also another different question: are we to read this as saying that Cynwyl abandoned Arthur on the battlefield and did not attempt to take him off the field of battle? If so, something much more serious is being alleged of Cynwyl Sant, his name not withstanding. All in all, this triad seems to be reminding the audience of how all this will end.

Matters do not become lighter when we turn to the relationship between Arthur and Cai. From the first time we see them interacting in the court scene, their relationship might be best described as edgy. In a passage where Arthur is seen being as authoritative as he can be, Cai somewhat tetchily questions Arthur’s generosity towards Culhwch, such that Arthur feels the need to remind Cai that they are only who they are to the extent that people seek them out (*hyt tra yn dygyrcher* (CO 136; trans. Davies 2007: 183)). One might have thought that Cai would not have needed that explained to him. Matters come to head during the completion of the *anoethau* when, after Cai and Bedwyr return with a leash made from Dillus Farfog’s beard, Arthur sings a mocking *englyn* to Cai:

Kynllyuan a oruc Kei  
 O uaryf Dillus uab Eureu  
 Pei iach dy angheu uydei.

Ac am hynny y sorres Kei hyt pan uu abreid y uilwyr yr Ynys honn tangneuedu y rwng Kei ac Arthur. Ac eissoes, nac yr anghyfnherth ar Arthur nac yr llad y wyr, nyt ymyrrwys Kei yn reit gyt ac ef o hynny allan (CO 978–4).

A leash was made by Cai  
 From the beard of Dillus son of Efrai  
 Were he alive, your death would result.

And because of that Cai sulked, so that warriors of this island could scarcely make peace between Cai and Arthur. And yet neither Arthur's misfortune nor the killing of his men could induce Cai to have anything to do with him in his hour of need from then on (adapted from Davies 2007: 207).

The consequence is that Cai isolates himself from the court and will not come to **help** even when Arthur needs **help** (*er anghyfnherth Arthur*), which we can take as an oblique reference to the fact that Arthur was not always effortlessly successful. Difficult though Cai might have been, there is a sense in which a royal court, however great, is diminished if it is not capacious enough to contain such egos. Moreover, just as references to Camlan arguably signal Arthur's end, Cai's death is alluded to by the presence of Gwyddog ap Menestyr, his killer, in the list of guarantors: *Gwydawc mab Menester, a ladawd Kei, ac Arthur a'y lladawd ynteu a'e urodyr yn dial Kei* (CO 283–284) 'Gwyddog son of Menestyr, who killed Cai, and Arthur killed him and his brothers to avenge Cai' (Davies 2007: 186). Despite their falling out, Arthur's sense of honour presumably required him to take revenge on Cai's killer. But the fact that they fall out at all suggests that, despite the superficial gloss of the Arthurian court, the cracks are beginning to show.

Looked at from this perspective, the narrative of the oldest animals may be seen to gain added significance (Bromwich & Evans 1992: lxii–lxiii for discussion). It functions dramatically as a device for tracking down Mabon ap Modron, and, in that context, what is crucial is their extreme age, accumulated experience, and knowledge of the world, but

there may be other things going on here.<sup>6</sup> The blackbird has been working at the anvil with his beak every evening and has reduced it to something smaller than a nut:<sup>7</sup>

Y Uwyalch a dywawt, 'Pan deuthum i yma gyntaf, eingon gof a oed yma, a minneu ederyn ieuanc oedwn. Ny wnaethpwyd gweith arnei, namyn tra uu uyg geluin arnei bob ucher. Hediw nyt oes kymmeint kneuen ohonei heb dreulaw ...' (CO 850–854).

The Blackbird said, 'When I first came here, there was a smith's anvil here, and I was a young bird. No work has been done on it except by my beak every evening. Today there's not so much of it as a nut that is not worn away ...' (Davies 2007: 203)

As the stag grew, so did his antlers and so did a great oak which is now nothing but a stump:

Y Karw a dywawt, 'Pan deuthum i yma gyntaf, nyt oed namyn vn reit o bop tu y'm penn, ac nyt oed yma goet namyn un o gollen derwen, ac y tyfwys honno yn dar can keing, ac y dygwydwys y dar gwedy hynny, a hediw nyt oes namyn wystyn coch ohonei ...' (CO 863–867).

The Stag said, 'When I first came here, there was only one antler on either side of my head, and there were no trees here except a single oak sapling, and that grew into an oak with a hundred branches. And the oak fell after that, and today nothing remains of it but a red stump ...' (Davies 2007: 203–204).

The owl has watched the destruction of not one, but three forests by Man during which time his wings have worn away:

'Pan deuthum i yma gyntaf, y cwm mawr a welwch glynn coet oed, ac y deuth kenedlaeth o dynyon idaw, ac y diuawyt, ac y tyuwys yr eil coet yndaw. A'r trydyd coet yw hwnn. A minneu, neut ydynt yn gynyon boneu vy esgyll ...' (CO 875–878).

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<sup>6</sup> For others versions of the 'oldest animals' narrative, see Jones 1951–1952 & 1970: 22–25; Ifans 1970–1972; and for discussion Bromwich & Evans 1992: 142–144 and Bromwich 2014: 235–237.

<sup>7</sup> It is not immediately clear what the bird is doing to wear away the anvil with its beak. Are we to suppose, for example, that he wiped his beak on it? Alternatively, we might think that, like a thrush, the bird was using the anvil to smash snails; this, at least, makes more sense of the object being an anvil.



'... When I first came here the large valley that you see was a wooded glen, and a race of men came there, and it was destroyed. And a second wood grew in it, and this wood is the third. And as for me, the roots of my wings are mere stumps ...' (Davies 2007: 204).

Finally, the eagle used to stand on a rock to peck at the stars, but that rock is now only a hand-breadth's tall:

Yr Eryr a dywawt, 'Mi a deuthum yma yr ys pell o amser, a phann deuthum yma yntaf maen a oed ym, ac y ar y benn ef y pigwn y syr bop ucher. Weithon nyt oes dyrnued yn y uchet ...' (CO 886–889).

The Eagle said, 'I came here a long time ago, and when I first came here I had a rock, and from its top I would peck at the stars every evening. Now it's not a hand's breadth in height ...' (Davies 2007: 204).

Each of the animals seems to measure time and the loss of environment in different and, perhaps, progressively longer ways: the wearing away of iron by the action of the bird itself, the natural lifetime of an oak (presumably linking the growth of the branches and the antlers), the destructive powers of Man in successive forests, and, finally, the long, slow geological time of the erosion of a great rock. But, crucially for the argument being made here, they all variously recognise that what is apparently permanent and unchangeable does, in fact, change, if only infinitesimally, and change for the worse, and is diminished. Again, this can be read as a warning not to assume that Arthur's power is permanent, however solid it might look.

This paper has argued that there are darker undertones in CO than has been recognised, undertones which both undermine the blithe insouciance of Arthur's power and sharpen the humour and satire which more obviously sit on the surface of the tale. It is pointed up by the alarmingly high casualty-rate among royal members of the long cast-list and by the way in which the list of guarantors is used to point forwards to the deaths of Arthur and Cai. Another consequence of taking a darker view of CO is that some aspects of the tale can be more easily related to other tales in the medieval Welsh corpus: for example, Cai more smoothly transmutes into the grumpy character of the romances, and in particular, with its foreshadowing of Camlan and darker sub-text, CO appears to foreshadow *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. If nothing else, understanding these darker aspects provides us with a more nuanced way of thinking about CO.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- BRh = Richards 1948  
 CO = Bromwich & Evans 1992  
 GPC = *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: University of Wales Dictionary*, ed. R. J. Thomas & G. A. Bevan. Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1950–2002); second edition (2003– ) on-line: *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, ed. G. Angharad Fychan & M. W. Roberts, <http://www.geiriadur.ac.uk/>

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