The Mesotomic Syllable in Old Welsh Poetry

Toby D. Griffen
Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville

In any discussion of the syllable in poetry, we are faced with a tension between orality and literacy. The syllable is after all an oral device, providing the very framework for speech. It should certainly come as no surprise when problems arise as this oral unit of expression is set down into writing. Moreover, the tension between the syllable as the poet pronounced it and the written representation of the syllable in the orthography is particularly acute in Old Welsh poetry, for the poet pronounced the syllable in Old Welsh, but the scribe we must rely upon wrote it down in Middle Welsh.

For example, while *Armes Prydein* was probably composed around A.D. 930 (I. Williams 1972:xii-xx, 1975:xxvi; Stephens 1986:17-18), well within the Old Welsh period and certainly in an Old Welsh dialect, the copy we have in *The Book of Taliesin* (J.G. Evans 1910; compare D.S. Evans 1964:xxii) dates from the Middle Welsh Peniarth 2 manuscript written down around A.D. 1275. Thus, we can never be quite sure on first examination what characteristics of the manuscript reflect Old Welsh oral usage and what characteristics are peculiar to the literacy of the Middle Welsh scribes.

This problem is crucial in determining the syllable-based meter. For one thing, we know that the accentuation pattern of Old Welsh differed significantly from that of Middle Welsh in that the former maintained a phonologically pertinent final pitch accent which may or may not have been accompanied by a nonpertinent stress accent on the ultima, while the latter maintained the final pitch accent and a stress accent on the penult (see Watkins 1972, but compare also Jackson 1975/76). As demonstrated in an article in the current *Studia Celtica* (Griffen 1991/92), this difference played a significant role in the development of the epenthetic vowel   a vowel added for ease of pronunciation, such as the popular second *a* in English *ath(a)lete*. (Indeed, the type of epenthetic vowel can be used to help determine the degree to which a dialect had evolved from Old to Middle Welsh.)

For an example of epenthesis (and later of mesotomy), let us examine the text of *Armes Prydein* as found in Ifor Williams 1972, with the English translations by Rachel Bromwich in the text. Lines are designated with the prefix AP, and a colon is inserted to show the caesura. The poem is supposed to adhere to the Cyhydedd Naw Ban (or CNB) meter, in which there are five syllables in the first half-line and four in the second (Morris Jones 1925:337-38, I. Williams 1972:lii).

The epenthetic vowel was one aspect of the poetry shared by Old and Middle Welsh both orally and literally (as opposed to Modern Welsh, where it is no longer written). According to a rule of scansion, a syllable created by an epenthetic vowel was not counted in the meter. For example, AP 179 *bydinoed am gwrwf : a thwrwf milwyr* 'hosts about the ale-feast, and the noise of warriors' appears to have six syllables in the initial half-line and five in the final -- a violation of the CNB meter in both half-lines. However, the second vowel of *gwrwf* [guruv] (from *cwrwf*) 'ale' and *thwrwf* [ᶿuruv] (from *twrwf*) 'noise' are both epenthetics that were not counted in the meter. Removing the syllables from these epenthetic vowels, we are left with the proper five syllables in the initial half-line and four in the final. (On epenthesis, see D.S. Evans 1964:12-13, Jackson 1953/337-38, Lewis and Pedersen 1974:93-94, Watkins 1961:29, Griffen 1991/92.)

We know that the rule of the epenthetic vowel -- that its syllable was not counted in poetic scansion -- held for Middle Welsh for two reasons. First of all, the medieval bardic grammarians have told us so (compare G.J. Williams and Jones 1934). Even if they had not told us, however, we could still deduce this fact from phonological analysis of the data. Every time an epenthetic vowel appears in a line, the line is one syllable too long; and if the epenthetic vowels are removed, no line is made too short. The phonological analysis, then, confirms the rules of the bardic grammarians not only for the Middle Welsh they were addressing, but also (as seen in the example above) in the original Old Welsh compositions.

Because of changes such as the Old Welsh accent shift, however, we can expect certain Old Welsh poetic rules to have disappeared and thus not to have been addressed by the medieval grammarians. In these cases, we must rely solely upon phonological analysis to determine what these rules may have been. Specifically, we must look for lines that regularly exceed the expected number of syllables and see if there are recurrent patterns in these lines such that the regular application of a rule will reduce the lines to the appropriate number of syllables and will not reduce any other lines below this number -- precisely the same kind of analysis that confirms the well-known rule of the epenthetic vowel.

As shown in great detail in an article to appear shortly in *Language Sciences* (Griffen in press), such a rule can be discovered. When two identical vowels precede the accented ultima, they are considered to occupy the same "extended" syllable. For example, AP 2 *maraned a meued : a hed genhyn* 'we shall have wealth and property and peace' appears to violate the CNB meter with six syllables (rather than the requisite five) in the first half-line. The word *maraned* [maraneᵟ] 'wealth, treasure', however, contains the sequence in which the pretonic vowels are of identical quality and the syllables of identical quantity. These two apparent syllables are thus counted as one "mesotomic syllable" (a syllable 'cut through the middle'), and the meter is justified as CNB.

This rule was possible because the sole accent in Old Welsh was on the ultima. Since all other syllables were thus phonologically equal in quantity, two vowels of the same quality (the same vowel) could be considered so identical as to be a continuous unit. In the accent pattern of Middle Welsh, on the other hand, the mesotomic syllable was not possible, for the development of penultimate stress and the other phonologically pertinent degrees throughout the word kept two sequential vowels from being considered this identical. Thus, the rule totally escaped the Middle Welsh grammarians.

The rule of the mesotomic syllable applies with striking regularity in *Armes Prydein*. Of the 199 lines in the poem, only a minority of 92 (or 46%) adheres to the CNB meter without mesotomy. With this device, 24 more lines are fully justified (an increase in 26% of acceptable lines), to bring the total to a majority of 116 lines (or 58%). Three more half-lines are justified by the device and two are brought closer to the meter. Thus, the mesotomic syllable assists in the proper scansion in 29 lines, bringing the total so far justified or assisted to a clear majority of 121 (or 61%). Moreover, every instance in which a mesotomic syllable would appear to introduce a violation of the meter is demonstrably attributable to spelling variants, foreign phonological systems, or Middle Welsh orthographic conventions. (See Griffen in press for analyses of individual lines.)

For the literary scholar, the importance of mesotomy goes far beyond its justification of metrical patterns in *Armes Prydein*. In the other poems of *The Book of Taliesin* -- even among the twelve believed to be accurate transmissions from the sixth-century bard (as presented in I. Williams 1968) -- mesotomy is also found, but it occurs with different degrees of regularity. For example, the rule is executed regularly in Poem IX "Dadolwch Vryen" ('The Complaint of Urien'), but it seems to be optional in Poem IV (unnamed), in which the word *meuedwys* '(he) has dowered (me)' is treated mesotomically in line 2 but not in line 3.

Furthermore, a formulaic four-line coda is added to a number of the poems. In some, the poet or scribe apparently did not recognize the mesotomic nature of one of the syllables and added a syllable to the coupled line to compensate for what was perceived as the extra syllable in the line in question. In other codas, this does not occur.

Line 3 of the coda begins with a proclitic negative particle *ny* 'not' (counted as part of the following verb). Thus, the line *Ny bydif yn dirwen* 'I shall not be happy' (in Poem II -- compare I. Williams 1968:43-44) as it appears in Poems IV, V, VI, and VII recognizes the Old Welsh rule of mesotomy and scans as five syllables. Accordingly, it is answered with the last line *na molwyf vryen* 'that I do not praise Urien' (in Poem IV). On the other hand, in Poems II, III, and IX the poet(s) or scribe(s) evidently did not recognize the mesotomy and scanned line 3 as six syllables, for an explicit first person singular pronoun *i* as a word or enclitic was

added in the last line, as in *na molwyf i vryen* (in Poem II). Of course, the question remains as to whether these differences existed in the compositions or were added to certain poems (but not to others) by Middle Welsh scribes seeking to "correct" the original.

Moreover, some of those who were literate in Old Welsh would most likely have failed to recognize the monosyllabic nature of the mesotomic syllable in writing -- which brings us back to the basic theme of orality versus literacy. While one could pronounce *maraned* as two syllables without much thought to it, one would be hard-pressed to view the word in writing and admit to its being disyllabic. This tension between the oral pronunciation and the written representation is comparable to that of a reader seeing the monosyllabic *gwlad* [gl^{w}a:d] 'country' and pronouncing it [gulad] -- compare the phonograph record *Pronouncing the Welsh Language* (Swansea: Welsh Teldisc Records, n.d.) with pronunciation lessons by "two of the best-known radio and TV artistes in Wales" (from the record jacket) and produced under the direction of the distinguished Welsh novelist Islwyn Ffowc Elis.

Mesotomy, like epenthesis, is thus an aspect of Old Welsh poetry deriving from the oral usage of Old Welsh, and it can be identified through routine phonological analysis in spite of the Middle Welsh literary filter. Such well patterned irregularities occurring in the Middle Welsh transmission will only rarely be attributable to scribal practice -- the vast majority can be ascribed to the original Old Welsh composition because of the rule's very regularity.

We thus have at our disposal a new tool for the literary investigator. Where two poems follow different rules of mesotomy, they reflect different dialects or idiolects, or at least different literary practices. We can therefore conclude that they were not written by the same poet.

In the case of the twelve poems allegedly written by the historical Taliesin, we see above that there were apparently two different poets *at the Old Welsh period of composition*. The latter point is stressed because this finding leads to a choice of two rather important conclusions about the author or authors of the poems:

> (1) On the one hand, there may have been more than one Taliesin in the Late Brythonic period. To have been composed in more than one dialect of Old Welsh, the poems would not have come down in one collection, but in several, each collection to its own dialect. That a single collection would have split up, been transmitted through Old Welsh and into Middle Welsh in separate collections, and then have rejoined in the Middle Welsh manuscript is perhaps more fortuitous than we could reasonably expect. This conclusion would have profound implications for our concept of the language and literature of the period and also for the insights we thought we had into the

political situation of the Late Brythonic period and the role of the bard in praising his lord.

(2) On the other hand, the poems may indeed have been written down by the same bard, but the Old Welsh transmissions may have been executed by different poets, as the less likely scenario above would suggest. This could provide us with good insights into the dialects and development of Old Welsh and could shed some light on the Old Welsh poets themselves. However, it would not totally eliminate the possibility that the poems might not be the work of a single sixth-century Taliesin.

A thorough examination of the twelve crucial poems is currently being undertaken by this researcher (and these will then be compared with the rest, which may lead to even more complications). Each poem will be analyzed individually to determine the extent and manner in which the mesotomic syllable is realized. In this stage of the procedure, then, each poem will be treated as an independent entity, and the process of mesotomy that occurs in the poem will be formulated as though it were the only such process at work. In each instance, the rules of mesotomy for the poem will be formulated in as succinct and general a manner as possible given the limited corpus.

Once each poem has been analyzed and its individual rules for mesotomy have been formulated, the sets of rules will be compared and collated. This will result in a systematic categorization of the poems into groups that likely represent (in their application of mesotomy) different dialects or idiolects. At this point, the rules of mesotomy characterized by each group will, wherever possible, be restated in a set of generalizations that most succinctly describes the realization of the linguistic process in the poetic language of the author. Thus, while the first step in the procedure will result in individual sets of rules for the poems, the second step will result in sets of rules for the poets.

From the rules derived for each poet, certain generalizations can be attempted: What relationships can be established between the authors identified through their particular sets of rules for mesotomy and the subject matter of the poems? In particular, what political affinities characterize the identified poets -- can all of the poems in praise of one leader be attributed to one poet? Such a finding would clearly support the first conclusion drawn above -- that there was more than one Late Brythonic Taliesin. Can these affinities be used to determine the poet's geographical dialect and/or the precise period of the transmission in Old Welsh? This finding, though not at all exclusive of the previous generalization, would provide insights into the second conclusion -- that the Old Welsh composers were

different, whether or not their Taliesins were different.

It is hoped that the findings of this on-going research can be reported to the Celtic Studies Association of North America in the reasonably near future.

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