PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE BOOK OF TALIESIN

POEMS OF WARFARE AND PRAISE IN AN ENCHANTED BRITAIN

Translated by **Gwyneth Lewis** and **Rowan Williams**

PENGUIN CLASSICS

THE BOOK OF TALIESIN

ROWAN WILLIAMS is the former Archbishop of Canterbury and currently Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. The author of many books from *The Wound of Knowledge* to *The Tragic Imagination*, he has published several poetry collections and is a contributor to the *New Statesman*.

GWYNETH LEWIS is an award-winning poet and was the National Poet of Wales from 2005 to 2006. Her books of poetry in Welsh and English include *Chaotic Angels*, *Sparrow Tree* and *Treiglo* (*Mutating*) and, in prose, *The Meat Tree: New Stories from the Mabinogion*. She is freelance and teaches at Middlebury College's Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont.

Copyrighted Material

To Marged Haycock,
in gratitude and admiration

Copyrighted Material

The Book of Taliesin

Poems of Warfare and Praise in an Enchanted Britain

Translated by GWYNETH LEWIS
and ROWAN WILLIAMS

PENGUIN CLASSICS
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN CLASSICS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

First published in hardback Penguin Classics 2019
Published in paperback 2020
001

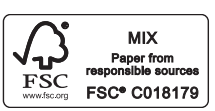
Translation and editorial material copyright © Gwyneth Lewis and Rowan Williams,
All rights reserved

The moral rights of the translator and editor have been asserted

Set in Sabon LT Std
Typeset by Dinah Drazin
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library
ISBN: 978–0–141–39693–4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

Contents

HEROIC POEMS

Copyrighted Material

LEGENDARY POEMS

Copyrighted Material

PROPHETIC POEMS

DEVOTIONAL POEMS

Copyrighted Material

UNGROUPED POEMS

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Acknowledgements

It would have been impossible to conceive of undertaking this translation without the scholarship of Ifor Williams and Marged Haycock. Their critical editions of the poems in *Llyvyr Taliessin* have provided the foundation for this version, and Marged Haycock's achievement in giving an exhaustive scholarly account of the corpus has enabled us to see this work in its full contemporary poetic and political context for the first time. Haycock's aural memory for the pairings of words in the mediaeval canon allows her to give sense to poems which present formidable difficulties. Without her work, we would have been lost; hence the dedication to her of this book, with our grateful appreciation. We should also like to put on record our appreciation for the rigorous and constructive editorial contributions of Donald Futers at Penguin, and the encouragement we have received from him and from Stuart Proffitt in the production of this book.

GL/RW

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Introduction

I. OVERVIEW

The fourteenth-century manuscript known as *Llyvyr Taliessin* ('The Book of Taliesin') is a hidden gem of mediaeval British poetry. Its pages include classic praise songs to the warring kings of early post-Roman Britain, as well as exhilarating poems, full of riddles and sparkling images, composed in mediaeval Wales. There are poems here that offer glimpses into fierce battles and the lavish spoils of war, poems to consolidate the poet's fame and status at the royal courts he serves; poems in a very distinctive voice that shifts unpredictably through time and space, the voice of a poet who writes as though he literally shared the life of the things he celebrates and had witnessed the distant events he recalls; and poems of a fierce national pride and lively religious devotion.

Containing compositions ranging in date from the ninth – possibly even the sixth – to the thirteenth century, the *Llyvyr Taliessin* brings vividly into focus the history and culture of more than one unfamiliar world. It gathers together the kind of songs that might have been sung in the Northern British courts of the sixth century with the poems of Taliesin's various anonymous successors in an ongoing bardic tradition, which transformed him into a North Welsh prophet, a kind of Christian shaman – and, eventually, an honorary laureate of Llywelyn the Great, the first mediaeval ruler to control practically the whole of an independent Wales.

Copyrighted Material

The poems of the later centuries show how substantially the half-mythical identity of Taliesin could be reworked in new contexts. Sometimes it becomes a 'persona' for later poets of the Middle Ages who need a mask from behind which they can comment on and intervene in contemporary politics; sometimes it is the focus for a complex world of legend, enchantment and riddling traditional wisdom. These later 'legendary' poems dazzle, mystify and fascinate. The voice that utters them, Taliesin-as-seer, is one of the most mercurial and tantalizing figures in the whole of Celtic literature. In these texts, he is a shape-shifter and time-traveller, a witness of ancient events and a prophet of future ones, boasting of his knowledge of occult bardic and spiritual lore. His journeys and adventures in this universe of mediaeval science fiction shed light on elements of bardic and mythological lore as well as mediaeval Christian arcana, filtered through the beauties and subtleties of the mediaeval Welsh poetic tradition. To read these poems is to see how a figure from the very beginnings of Welsh poetry is transformed to serve a variety of new creative agendas, through the mediaeval imagining and appropriation of that history; and what emerges from this process is a powerful body of song, a poetry of secrets, prophecy, death and resurrection.

But also among the pieces in the collection are poems by mediaeval writers who use the name and mythic persona of Taliesin as a mouthpiece for some very specific contemporary political preoccupations. There are poems here that are effectively coded manifestos for political resistance and strategic alliances against the English invaders. Along with these we find carefully crafted religious meditations, as if the writers and the final editor of the collection wanted to make it clear to suspicious mediaeval authorities that bardic wisdom was not in competition with Christian doctrine – even though many poems are scathing about the clergy's ignorance of traditional lore. Altogether, it is a strikingly broad range of material. The only major subject not found here is anything that could be called love poetry: apart from a couple of glancing references,

Copyrighted Material

sexual passion is not on the poetic radar, and women are generally absent, except for the enigmatic figure of Ceridwen, the sorceress who owns the cauldron of poetic inspiration. There is no shortage of love poems in the Welsh mediaeval repertoire overall, so we have to conclude that this topic was simply not one of those associated with the particular poetic register of the 'Taliesin' voice.

The oldest poems in the anthology, which we have placed at the beginning of our translation, are associated with a figure mentioned in chronicles of the early Middle Ages, a Taliesin who praises the courage and generosity of his warlord patrons. These poems portray the 'heroic age' of Britain a century or so after the end of Roman rule in the early fifth century CE – a period of intermittent warfare between British rulers as well as struggles against the Saxon settlers. We see swords glinting, blood spilt and javelins falling like rain on the enemy; cattle raids and victory feasts are evoked alongside the heady memories of battle. The patrons of these poems are idealized figures, larger than life in their strength, virtue, wisdom and open-handedness. They are the superheroes of early Welsh history. The poems provide a vivid, almost cinematic picture of dynastic and tribal conflict and of the life of the kingly British households of the period. This is a world in which a leader keeps a poet in his court as something rather like a PR specialist: his job is to celebrate martial victories and to ensure that an idealized account of a battle or leader survives as official history. The poet depicts the glamour of court life, its drinking and feasting, and the luxury that a favoured poet can enjoy: Taliesin describes with relish the gifts of horses and fine clothes with which his songs are rewarded. Only the poetry attributed to Neirin, Taliesin's rival and approximate contemporary, can equal him in the vigour and freshness of his descriptions of that early mediaeval world of fierce courage, bloodshed, imaginative energy and intoxication (both physical and emotional).

From its oldest strata in the praise poetry of the British courts to the later material that engages with the mainstream themes of European faith and culture, whether the legends of

Copyrighted Material

Alexander the Great or assorted bits of Christian apocrypha, the *Llyvyr Taliessin* prompts all sorts of insights and questions about social and imaginative life in an unfamiliar stretch of British history, the world of the Welsh-speaking communities of Western Britain from 600 to 1300 – a collective imagination conveyed in a unique body of poetry. But these poems have not only preserved historical memories; the more developed figure of the prophetic and 'shamanistic' Taliesin, ranging through the natural world and penetrating the mysteries of the past, has had a huge impact on modern English poetry, including the work of the war poets David Jones and Robert Graves, the critic and novelist Charles Williams and that unusual and brilliant philosophical poet, Vernon Watkins. Taliesin, explosive, surprising and consistently teasing and mysterious, still speaks to a variety of modern audiences.

Writers and scholars have been familiar with this manuscript for a long time. A new and accessible translation is, however, long overdue, and this is the first complete version of the poems in English for over a century. There are a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century versions of the material, but they suffer from the lack of a solid scholarly edition of the original texts; our understanding of the development and workings of mediaeval Welsh has advanced a good deal in the last hundred years, and it is possible now to make far better guesses at the meaning of obscure passages. Many earlier renderings are misleading, some wildly fanciful. The earlier 'heroic' poems were admirably edited in the mid-twentieth century by the great Celtic scholar Sir Ifor Williams,[1] but a full critical text of the later poems has only existed since Marged Haycock's editions, especially in her *Legendary Poems from the Book of Taliesin*[2] and *Prophecies from the Book of Taliesin,*[3] published in 2007 and 2013 respectively. This monument of recent scholarship means that it is possible to approach the sometimes formidable challenges of translating the *Llyvyr Taliessin* with greater confidence than hitherto. But while we have aimed at a translation marked by accuracy and intelligibility, we have also tried to convey some of the real flavour of the rhythm and music of

Copyrighted Material

the Welsh originals: if these versions do not give a sense of the sheer poetic energy of the texts – of their verbal 'spring' – they will have failed.

The figure of Taliesin and the wildly diverse poetic material of the *Llyvyr Taliessin* continue to be of persistent and compelling interest as we try to imagine the nature of imagination itself. We are regularly reminded that we currently live in a 'disenchanted' age – which seems to mean that we are condemned to see the world around us as a storehouse of raw material for self-gratifying human projects, and the remote history and residually remembered myths we inherit as, at best, decorative fancies and, at worst, hangovers from an embarrassingly unsophisticated past. The Taliesin poems insist, in a voice that is passionate, sometimes derisively challenging, sometimes breathtakingly fresh, adventurous and musical, that such disenchantment is simply a way of settling down into a drab and reductive version of who we are and what our world is. We hardly need these days to underline the practical effects of this reductive approach, in the devastation of our environment, the brutal erosion of the rights and dignities of indigenous peoples and the sheer frantic hollowness at the heart of the so-called developed world. In such a world, poetic imagination is no idle luxury: the poet is the person who is most intensely and fully aligned with the hidden energy and spirit that pervades our world, and we are poorer and less human if we try to sideline or ignore this truth.

Today, words inspired by the Taliesin poetry stand on the main facade of the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff. The inscription is bilingual, with the Welsh justified left, and the English – a different phrase, not a translation – justified right. Spelled out in six-foot-tall letters, each forming its own stained-glass window in a single, subtle hue, are the lines, *CREU GWIR / FEL GWYDR / O FFWRNAIS AWEN*: 'creating truth like glass in inspiration's furnace'. Written by Gwyneth Lewis, the words suggest that the dome of the building is Ceridwen's inverted cauldron, as if the gifts of *awen* were spilling over into the work of the resident artistic companies. It is a

Copyrighted Material

powerful image for the continuing energy of these poems, and their resonance for today's readers.

II. THE FIGURE OF TALIESIN

The 'Historical' Taliesin

The name Taliesin is a combination of the word 'tal', meaning 'top' or 'gable end' (as in a house or forehead) with 'iesin', meaning 'beautiful', 'shimmering' or 'gleaming' – hence the name's common English translation, 'Shining Brow'. (Why the poet's brow should be radiant isn't clear.) It is possible to read certain passages as implying that the name designates the water into which the legendary poet was cast as a baby, referring in those cases to the shining horizon of a river or sea. In her literal translation of the poem 'Taliesin's Sweetnesses' (p. 42), Haycock glosses 'tal' as 'countenance'.[4] This might suggest an echo of Moses' radiant face after he saw God.[5] 'Tal' may also mean 'value', which could indicate a name meaning something like 'surpassing worth' or 'shining excellence'.

Although the poems in the *Llyvyr Taliessin* are implicitly grouped under this one name, it has long been clear that the anthology is the work of several hands. But at the beginning of the story is the individual writer who appears in chronicles and other early texts as a sixth-century bard, a court poet of the heroic age, celebrating the material and military exploits of a number of patrons, and enjoying the rich rewards of his work. We first meet this Taliesin in the early-ninth-century *History of the Britons* (*historia Brittonum*), composed in North Wales and traditionally but unreliably attributed to a Welsh cleric named Nennius on the basis of one set of manuscripts of the text. It relates the story of the British from the first arrival of the island's namesake, Brutus (a descendant of the Trojan hero, Aeneas, the legendary founder of Rome) up to the time of the sixth- and seventh-century conflicts between the British and the Germanic settlers – the people we now call the Anglo-Saxons –

Copyrighted Material

who by then were establishing their rule over most of what is now England. The *History* shows an interest in the struggles of various British rulers, some apparently from Cumbria and the Pennine regions, some from North Wales, against the Angles of the territories that would by the later seventh century become the kingdom of Northumbria, then known as Deira and Bernicia.

Embedded in the narratives about this conflict, but with no very clear connection to what comes before or after, there is a short list of the great poets of Britain around the time of the consolidation of Anglian territories under King Ida (who died *c.*559). Five names are mentioned: Talhaearn, called 'father of *awen*', the usual word for poetic inspiration in Welsh poetry; Neirin, whose name appears elsewhere as Aneirin; Taliesin; Blwchfardd; and Cian Guenith Guaut, literally 'Cian, wheat-harvest of song'.[6] It seems a reasonable inference that these figures were based primarily in what later Welsh writers call the 'Old North', the British territories of Northern England lost to the Anglian settlers between the sixth and eighth centuries. Neirin certainly belongs in the North, as he is credited with the authorship of the *Gododdin*, a loose cycle of poems commemorating and lamenting the failed attempt of a British king from Edinburgh, in or around the last decade of the sixth century, to defend or recapture territory from the Northumbrian Angles – the climax of which campaign is a disastrous battle at 'Catraeth', possibly the modern Catterick in North Yorkshire.[7]

The *Gododdin* mentions Taliesin's name in passing, as if alluding to a well-known personage of the period, but this tells us little beyond the fact that, at some point in the composition of the *Gododdin* text as we now have it, Neirin and Taliesin were thought of as roughly contemporary with each other.

Thus, the earliest traditions suggest that Taliesin was active in the late sixth century in the British kingdoms of the North. But there is very little secure evidence – independent of the *Llyvyr Taliessin* poems themselves – for any more exact details of a date and place of composition. It is quite likely that the listing

Copyrighted Material

of the names of famous bards in the *History* is one aspect of its author's attempt to present ninth-century North Wales as the natural inheritor of the literary and military glories of the lost Northern kingdoms that had been at the forefront of resistance to the pagan Germanic invaders.

The name of Taliesin next appears in Brittany in a saint's life possibly dating from the eleventh century.[8] Here, we are told of his visit to a monastery in Brittany founded by the celebrated sixth-century British writer, Gildas, and Taliesin is presented primarily not as a poet, but rather as a sage and prophet: a seer who predicts the birth of the saint, Iudicael, King of Brittany in the early seventh century. This text would then agree with the *History* in placing Taliesin in the mid- to late sixth century; and the association with Gildas is an interesting detail. Gildas wrote a savagely polemical open letter attacking a number of sixth-century Western British rulers, among them the formidable North Welsh king, Maelgwn of Gwynedd, who appears in the later Taliesin tradition as a menacing figure, the enemy of Taliesin's own royal patron.

The Breton link is likewise to be found in the *Life of Merlin*, written in the mid-twelfth century by Geoffrey of Monmouth (best known as the author of a *History of the Kings of Britain*, which contains the first full-length version of the story of King Arthur). The *Life of Merlin* includes several dialogues between Merlin and 'Telgesinus' – a slightly archaic form of Taliesin's name – who is said to have studied in Brittany with Gildas. Geoffrey's Taliesin is again a sage and seer who meditates on the mysteries of creation, the movements of the heavenly bodies, the winds and the waters, and so on, as well as claiming to have sailed with the wounded King Arthur to the 'Island of Apples', where he was to be healed of his injuries.

Around the same time as Geoffrey's work appears, Taliesin also begins to surface again in Wales: he is referred to by one poet of the twelfth century as a bard to one of the leading royal houses of the Old North, the family of Cynfarch, father of Urien, whose battles are mentioned in the *History of the Britons*; and within the next half century or so we find two dia-

Copyrighted Material

logues involving Taliesin in the poetic anthology known as *The Black Book of Carmarthen*, one with Myrddin (Merlin) and one with an otherwise unknown Ugnach. The former dialogue seems quite independent of the material in Geoffrey's *Life of Merlin*, as it focuses on conflicts of the sixth century which were long remembered in Welsh legend, especially the Battle of Arfderydd (the modern Arthuret in Cumberland), traditionally dated to 573; the latter text is hard to characterize, but seems to represent Taliesin, here perhaps in the role of a crusader of some sort, being invited midway through a journey to the Holy Land to break his journey at Ugnach's home.

Any reader of the *Llyvyr Taliessin* collection will rapidly see how diverse the material is – including the material directly ascribed to the great poet. Since the mid-twentieth century, scholars have acknowledged the distinctiveness of the core of poems, quite different in style and vocabulary from the rest, relating to the heroic memories of the 'Old North'. This group, which makes up the first section of our translation, the 'Heroic Poems', includes laments for rulers, descriptions of battles against various enemies (often, but not always, the Angles of Northumbria), and celebrations of the courage and generosity of the poet's royal patrons.

The consistent evidence of these poems supports the Northern connection, especially the poems about or addressed to Urien son of Cynfarch: clearly a significant figure in this world, he is described as Lord of 'Rheged', which seems to be a kingdom taking in large tracts of Cumbria and southern Scotland, and possibly at some periods also including territories in North Yorkshire.[9] Urien is variously associated with Catraeth (which, as already noted, may be Catterick), Aeron (Airedale or Ayrshire[10]), Llwyfennydd (usually identified as the Lyvennet valley in Cumbria) and Erechwydd, or perhaps Yr Echwydd – 'the clear/fresh waters'. Erechwydd may be the Solway Firth, as has sometimes been proposed – but not if 'fresh water' is to be taken literally as non-salt water. It could be, as Sir Ifor Williams tentatively suggested, the Yorkshire Swale with its falls at Richmond, not very far from Catterick, which would chime

Copyrighted Material

with the traditional identification of Catraeth with Catterick;[11] more recently, Andrew Breeze has argued that it may be a generic term for the low-lying wetlands of East Yorkshire.[12] Other place names in these poems, including a possible reference to the Cumbrian River Eden, can credibly be located in Cumbria and North Yorkshire. There are also poems about a ruler named Gwallawg who is associated with the West Yorkshire kingdom of Elmet. He appears as a contemporary of Urien in the *History of the Britons*, where he is involved, like Urien, in battle against the Northumbrian Angles, but apparently is not otherwise an ally of Rheged. Another poem celebrates a king of Powys in mid-Wales.

For a long time, these 'heroic' poems were accepted at face value as authentic compositions of the sixth century which had perhaps been reworked in less archaic language as time went on. The position suggested by more recent scholarship is, as we shall see, not quite so simple; but these compositions do undoubtedly constitute the oldest category of poems in the *Llyvyr Taliessin* – specifically, those which have some claim to be connected with a fairly definite historical time and place. Their mention of and association with a single figure named Taliesin is the first step in the creation of the complex and varied collection contained in the single fourteenth-century manuscript we are translating here, a collection which probably reached its present form in the thirteenth century.[13] We do not know whether the title is mediaeval (it is not part of the original mediaeval text); it is rather more likely to have been given by the owner of the manuscript in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, in recognition of the substantial number of items it contains which are associated with the figure of Taliesin.

What the poems in the collection show very clearly is how multifaceted this figure had become by the Middle Ages. Many of the later poems in the collection make reference to the characters of the *Mabinogion* stories, the well-known series of mediaeval Welsh prose tales narrating the doings of early Welsh heroes and of King Arthur and his followers. These references link Taliesin especially with stories involving the figure of the

Copyrighted Material

sorcerer Gwydion and the 'children of Dôn';[14] but it is noticeable that, even with these strong (and ultimately pre-Christian) associations, Taliesin is also shown as dutifully commending his work to God and as being familiar both with theological questions, most notably those relating to the Incarnation, and with apocryphal traditions surrounding the biblical narratives. In other words, this later Taliesin becomes a bridge figure between traditional Welsh lore and the cosmopolitan world of early mediaeval ecclesiastical learning.

This is the picture built up in the most elaborate of the second group of poems in this book, those which have been brilliantly edited by Marged Haycock under the designation 'Legendary Poems',[15] and it is not too difficult to discern its historical context. The sharp anti-clerical animus in many of them, notably 'The Spoils of Annwfn' (p. 98), reflects not so much a global hostility to the clergy as a resentment of the new monastic foundations of the period after the Norman Conquest, the Benedictine houses that sprang up in proximity to the new castles and settlements in the Welsh Marches. Monks from continental Europe are unlikely by this date to have been familiar with or sympathetic to the rather older style of clerical learning represented by the riddling and legendary elaborations of the Christian story found in the Irish or Anglo-Saxon texts of the early Middle Ages; Taliesin thus becomes a mouthpiece for this archaic Christian lore as well as the archetypal bard and seer, so that it would not have seemed strange to ascribe to him the cluster of religious poems included in the *Llyvyr Taliessin*.

Taliesin the Shape-Shifter

So the Taliesin persona changed significantly between the ninth and the eleventh century. Initially a straightforward court bard, Taliesin mutates in later poems into a more mysterious, charismatic, riddling figure. The legendary poems present a Taliesin whose status as sage or sorcerer – *dewin*, or occasionally even *derwyd*, 'druid' – is so equal in importance to his standing as

Copyrighted Material

a poet that the two might more accurately be said to become inseparable.

The gift of *awen*, poetic inspiration, involves both technical skill in the bardic craft on the one hand – including metrical ingenuity and familiarity with a huge range of traditional lore, from archaic British narratives and characters to natural history, geography and theology – and, on the other, what is often called the shamanic gift of inhabiting a life other than the poet's own. In the poems, the latter manifests itself in reports of the poet's shape-shifting and reincarnation, and in his claims to have been contemporary with various heroes of the remote past. The early Irish 'Song of Amergin' is often quoted as a parallel to this material:

> I am the wind on the sea.
> I am the wave of the sea [. . .]
> I am a strong wild boar.
> I am a salmon in the water.[16]

The relation between this and the Taliesin poems is hard to determine, given that the 'Song of Amergin' cannot be dated with any accuracy; but it makes sense to think that both Taliesin and Amergin (who in legend is an 'Archpoet' of ancient pre-Christian Ireland) represent a recognized convention of poetic composition. The context for the Taliesin texts, however, is distinctive: it is often an imagined contest with rival bards, in which the Taliesin figure demonstrates his superiority to his competitors by spelling out at triumphant length the questions he can answer about which his rivals are ignorant, and by listing the various embodiments he has experienced, as in the opening of 'The Battle of the Trees' (p. 54):

> I was in many forms
> Before my release:
> I was a slim enchanted sword,
> I believe in its play.
> I was a drop in air,

Copyrighted Material

The sparkling of stars,
A word inscribed,
A book in priest's hands,
A lantern shining
For a year and a half.
A bridge for crossing
Over threescore *abers*.[17]
I was path, I was eagle,
I was a coracle at sea.
I was bubbles in beer,
I was a raindrop in a shower.
I was a sword in the hand;
I was a shield in battle.
I was a harp string,
Enchanted nine years
In water, foaming.
I was tinder in fire,
I was a forest ablaze.

(ll. 1–23)

Extravagant claims have been made for reading this material as surviving evidence for ancient druidic lore.[18] This is speculative, to put it mildly; but it cannot be denied that these extraordinary poems reflect a sophisticated and complex understanding of poetic composition in which the concept of *awen* is central. It would be misleading to translate this idea of inspiration as 'Muse': it is better thought of as a state of altered consciousness in which the poet receives knowledge of matters beyond what can be routinely learned. According to Gerald of Wales's description of the *awenyddion*, or inspired soothsayers, of the twelfth century,[19] the gift of *awen* produces the same kinds of extreme behaviour as are associated with spirit possession: loud shouting, trance and catalepsy, disconnected but also very elaborate speech, narrated experiences of supernatural encounters which trigger the exercise of the gift, and a subsequent inability to remember what was said under its influence. Those who have encountered traditional praise singers in contempor-

Copyrighted Material

ary settings – they will still be found in tribal settings in parts of Africa, for example – will recognize these or similar manifestations.[20]

The allusiveness, disconnectedness and extravagance of many of these poems may, then, be an attempt to reflect the style or register of such ecstatic states of consciousness. This need not mean that the poems are direct transcriptions of specific compositions originating in altered states. As with all ecstatic phenomena which have a routine ritual place in a culture, the irruption of the supernatural will follow a traditional pattern, and there will be expectations about both the actual expression and the transmission of what has been delivered. A poet deliberately composing in this turbulently allusive and mystifying mode is acknowledging that if poetry is to be recognized as the authentic voice of some kind of ecstatic perception, it must follow certain classical, normative exemplars of poetic ecstasy. The compositions of lesser mortals must at least reflect something of the character of primary and very significant examples of the ecstatic voice; conventions grow up as to how the effect of *awen* can be represented in poetry. And it is clear that the composite figure of Taliesin has become such a primary and significant example of ecstatic utterance – one comparable to the Greek Orpheus: a figure to whom poems can be ascribed on the basis that they illustrate, or even teach, a particular way of *being* a poet and *sounding like* a poet. He is the model for bards aiming to produce a poetry that claims its origins in ecstasy (the transported state of being beside or outside of oneself) and supernatural visitation; and it seems likely, in fact, that the legendary poems were first collected with the aim of providing an educational template for such productions.

Exactly why Taliesin's name should be associated with this in so specific a way is not clear; but it has been convincingly argued that the tradition linking Taliesin with the Christian polemicist Gildas[21] is meant to show that Taliesin is a reputable Christian poet, who, while being endowed with the charismatic gifts of a traditional bard, does not waste them on frivolity and sycophancy, like the court poets of Maelgwn Gwynedd who

Copyrighted Material

are so fiercely castigated by Gildas. He is both an exponent of a tradition that has genuinely 'shamanistic' features – journeys across time and space, ecstatic participation in the life of the natural world – and a Christian scholar of a somewhat archaic variety.

Taliesin the Prophet

Taliesin's status as an inspired seer means that it is not at all surprising to find a collection of 'prophetic' poems alongside the pieces we have noted so far. *Armes Prydein* ('The Great Prophecy of Britain', p. 121) is the oldest and most extended instance; we cannot be certain whether it was originally associated with Taliesin's name, but it establishes what was to be one of the unmistakeable 'Taliesin' voices in the generations to come. Its themes, and a good deal of its phraseology, are recycled in several later poems looking forward to a unification of the British – usually under the leadership of Gwynedd – and the advent of a heroic deliverer.

The latter, often called *mab darogan* ('son of prophecy') or *Lleminog* ('the Leaper'), is a sort of reincarnation of one or another of the great warrior kings of the sixth and seventh centuries. There are many references to Cadwallon of Gwynedd, the most prominent among these warlords, who, for a short period in the early 630s, conquered and occupied Northumbria. His son, Cadwaladr, likewise appears regularly; and there are also allusions to another messianic figure, 'Cynan', who may be the Cynan Garwyn of Powys celebrated in one of the early heroic poems of Taliesin, or Conan Meriadoc, who was credited with leading the British migration to Brittany in the fifth century and establishing the line of independent kings there. Quite possibly these figures came to be fused in popular imagination. The hoped-for leader is imagined as someone returning from exile (as did Cadwallon, according to mediaeval traditions), or arriving from over the sea, or both; on their return they can be guaranteed to overthrow corrupt or alien rulers within Wales, and rally the other Welsh kingdoms to resistance and ultimate

Copyrighted Material

victory over the English.

In fact, this group of prophetic poems may help us understand what might have prompted the compilation of something like the *Llyvyr Taliessin* in the first place. The figure of the victorious leader who establishes a new order in Gwynedd and invites other rulers to follow him in a campaign of liberation is an obvious fit for the greatest of mediaeval Welsh rulers, the thirteenth-century Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, known as Llywelyn the Great, and it is not difficult to read most of these pieces as, in effect, propaganda on behalf of Llywelyn and the court of Gwynedd. A direct connection with that court can be established, if Marged Haycock is right in identifying the hand of one of Llywelyn's own bards, Llywarch ap Llywelyn, known for some reason as *Prydydd y Moch* ('The Poet of the Pigs') in a significant number of the legendary poems.[22] Haycock notes a large number of verbal convergences between Llywarch's works and the riddling, shamanic songs of Taliesin in the role of *dewin* (sage and magician). A natural inference is that the bulk of the legendary and prophetic pieces represent a careful weaving together of two kinds of poem: those which underline the unique status of Taliesin as bard and visionary, and those in which this particular supernaturally authoritative figure foretells Welsh victories under the leadership of the royal house of Gwynedd.

We have indicated that the corpus of legendary poems had probably already formed part of a bardic educational programme, illustrating how the ecstatic and magical 'Taliesin' voice could be credibly evoked and represented, long before their incorporation in *Llyvyr Taliessin*. Edited, elaborated and to some extent homogenized by Prydydd y Moch, this pre-existing corpus of legendary poetry, along with the more archaic heroic pieces, was then attached to a group of more recent (perhaps early-thirteenth-century) variations on the themes of the *Armes Prydein* to produce a collection that appropriates the Taliesin tradition, with its deep historical and quasi-mythological roots, for the glory of the North Welsh kingdom. We noted earlier that the original author of the *History of the Britons*

Copyrighted Material

aimed to incorporate the legacy (literary and political) of the Old North into the prehistory of Gwynedd, so as to enhance the prestige of the North Welsh kingdom. In a very similar way, the final compiler of the *Llyvyr Taliessin* is co-opting the great prophetic sorcerer and singer into Llywelyn the Great's court.

The other main group of poems in the *Llyvyr* is the handful of devotional pieces, some quite lengthy, many of them in a state of serious textual confusion. On the face of it, it is not at all clear what they are doing alongside the other pieces in the collection. But we have already noted that part of the authority assigned to the figure of Taliesin is rooted in his expertise in ecclesiastical learning of a certain kind; and the presence of these poems in the *Llyvyr* may have been an attempt to set out the sort of thing a Christian bard, familiar with traditional techniques but also literate in a clerical way, might be expected to know. They are not on the whole particularly striking compositions, though the dramatic sections of 'A Prophecy of Judgement Day' (p. 163) show some vigour and imagination, and 'The Stem of Jesse' (p. 178) is a stylistically elegant piece which sustains a consistent flow of devotionally intense address and imagery. The texts in this group, likewise gathered together in this edition under the heading 'Devotional Poems', show a high level of corruption – especially in the often incomprehensible place names of the 'Saints and Martyrs of the Faith' poem (p. 169), where any translation is bound to depend on a lot of informed guesswork.[23]

Marged Haycock's edition places the handful of poems about classical heroes (Hercules and Alexander) alongside the compositions of Taliesin as legendary seer, and we have followed her editorial judgement on this; but they might equally well have been set alongside the devotional compositions, insofar as they reflect a degree of 'non-traditional' learning and a moral and religious perspective on the heroes of the remote past. Neither the classical nor the devotional poems are likely to date from before 1200.

The *Llyvyr Taliessin* contains two other substantial poems marking the death of a ruler but not associated with either the

Copyrighted Material