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Peredur and the Problem of Inappropriate Questions

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jias-2021-0002>

Abstract: This article reopens the question of the relationship between the medieval Welsh version of the Grail narrative, the *Historia Peredur vab Efwrawc*, and the French *Conte du Graal* of Chrétien de Troyes. It explores the seeming inconsistencies in the Welsh tale's presentation of the Grail procession, and suggests that the hero's actions, and in particular his reticence in asking questions about the procession, should be read in the context of medieval Welsh customs and legal tradition. The article concludes with an exploration of the implications of the proposed interpretation for the reading of *Historia Peredur* as a postcolonial narrative.

Résumé: Cet article revient sur la question de la relation entre la version galloise médiévale du récit du graal *Historia Peredur vab Efwrawc* et le *Conte du graal* de Chrétien de Troyes. Il explore les incohérences apparentes dans la présentation du cortège du graal dans le récit gallois et suggère que les actions du héros, et en particulier sa réticence à poser des questions sur le cortège, doivent être lues dans le contexte des coutumes et de la tradition juridique galloise médiévale. L'article se conclut par une exploration des implications de l'interprétation proposée pour la lecture postcolonialiste de l'*Historia Peredur*.

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Aufsatz wird aufs Neue die Beziehung zwischen der mittelalterlichen walisischen Fassung der Gralserzählung, *Historia Peredur vab Efwrawc*, und dem französischen *Conte du Graal* des Chrétien de Troyes untersucht. Er analysiert die scheinbaren Inkonsistenzen in der Beschreibung der Gralsprozession im walisischen Text und setzt das Verhalten des Helden, vor allem die Tatsache, dass er keine Fragen über die Prozession stellt, in den Zusammenhang mittelalterlicher walisischer Bräuche und Rechtstraditionen. Der letzte Teil des Aufsatzes befasst sich mit einer Untersuchung der Implikationen der vorgeschlagenen Interpretation für die Lektüre des *Historia Peredur* in einem postkolonialen Kontext.

Keywords: Middle Welsh *Peredur*, Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, Grail procession and questions, medieval Welsh law, postcolonialism

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Discussions of the various medieval European versions of the Grail story tend to gravitate towards analysis informed by the French text. In most cases this is perfectly reasonable and partly justified by the primacy of the *Conte du Graal* of Chrétien de Troyes (pre-1191), the earliest datable surviving version of the narrative and progenitor to most of the others.¹ There is one member of this family, however, where such anchoring of analysis in the French narrative has been demonstrated to do more harm than good.² This outlier is the Welsh *Historia Peredur vab Efrawc* (henceforth: *Peredur*).³ Despite the reservations voiced in the scholarly community about reading this text in the light of the *Conte du Graal*, some of the more confusing (or confused) elements of this tale have been furnished with explanations grounded in the French narrative, and in some instances based on assumptions of uncritical work by unthinking or unskilled redactors.⁴

One of the most discussed episodes in both the Welsh and the French narratives is the mysterious procession witnessed by the hero, which in the *Conte du*

1 Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte du Graal*, in *Chrétien de Troyes. Romans*, ed. by Charles Méla (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1994), pp. 937–1211; Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval. The Story of the Grail*, trans. by Burton Raffel (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

2 For the argument that reading *Peredur* in the light of the French text exclusively may lead to misunderstanding the text, see Brynley F. Roberts, ‘Y Cysyniad o Destun’, in *Canhwyll Marchogion: Cyd-destunoli Peredur*, ed. by Sioned Davies and Peter Wynn Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 50–64 (p. 56), and Brynley F. Roberts, ‘*Peredur Son of Efrawg*: A Text in Transition’, *Arthuriana*, 10 (2000), 57–72 (pp. 60, 71) (English-language version); see also the discussion of the text in Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, ‘*Historia Peredur ab Efrawc*’, in *Arthur in the Celtic Languages: The Arthurian Legend in Celtic Literatures and Traditions*, ed. by Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan and Erich Poppe (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019), pp. 145–57 (pp. 151–54).

3 *Historia Peredur vab Efrawc*, ed. by Glenys Witchard Goetinck (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976). There are several translations into modern English. *The Mabinogion*, trans. by Sioned Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 65–102, is used in this article. Glenys Goetinck, *Peredur. A Study of Welsh Tradition in the Grail Legends* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1975) remains the only monograph devoted to the discussion of the text in relation to other versions of the story.

4 The Welsh text and its relationship to the *Conte du Graal* have been much discussed, and a full bibliography would not be practicable here. Secondary literature relevant to the subject treated here is referred to in footnotes throughout the discussion below. For a general introduction with an up-to-date bibliography, see Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan and Erich Poppe, ‘The First Adaptations from French: History and Context of a Debate’, in *Arthur in the Celtic Languages*, pp. 110–16. One of the views is that the French text also is ultimately based on mythical ‘Celtic’ elements, later re-interpreted in a Welsh context in *Peredur*; for an example of this approach, see William Sayers, ‘An Archaic Tale-Type Determinant of Chrétien’s Fisher King and Grail’, *Arthuriana*, 22 (2012), 85–101, which includes a brief overview of his perception of the relationship between the two texts (p. 94). See also John Carey, *Ireland and the Grail* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2007).

Graal introduced the Grail to the world, but which in *Peredur* features a human head.⁵ Of particular importance within this episode is the hero's 'failure to ask the appropriate question', to use Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan's words.⁶ The two subsequent references to this procession made in *Peredur*, both matching Chrétien's narrative rather than the Welsh procession in the details they give, have been understood hitherto as confused or interpolated references to the French romance.⁷ This interpretation, in turn, has led most to read the scene of the procession itself in the light of the French text, including a general assumption that the hero was wrong not to have enquired after the nature of the things he was witnessing.⁸ This is because Chrétien's narrative includes an explicit condemnation of the hero's silence during the procession scene: 'Mais plus se taist qu'il ne convient' [But he was silent longer than he ought to have done].⁹ *Convenir* in medieval French has the sense of moral obligation as well as of necessity.¹⁰ After the castle and its inhabitants magically disappear the following morning, Perceval meets a cousin, who reprimands him for his inappropriate silence, explaining its disastrous results. Since this pattern is seen in other versions of this story, the scene's function is usually assumed to be the same.¹¹ We shall see, however, that *Peredur*

5 *Historia Peredur vab Efracw*, p. 20; *The Mabinogion*, p. 73; Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte du Graal*, ll. 3128–275 (pp. 1035–40).

6 Lloyd-Morgan, 'Historia Peredur', p. 145.

7 The first of these is made by the 'Ugly Damsel' who appears at Arthur's court. This episode has attracted somewhat more attention. See Goetinck, *Peredur*, pp. 75–76; Lloyd-Morgan, 'Historia Peredur', pp. 147–48, 150. The second reference occurs towards the end of the narrative in the episode of the witches of Gloucester (unique to the Welsh tale).

8 For an overview of the developments of the topos of the unasked questions see Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail. Imagination and Belief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 44, 78, and especially pp. 93, 108–12. See also the recent discussion of the importance of the questions in the German version of the tale in Michael Stolz, 'Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*: Searching for the Grail', in *A Handbook of Arthurian Romance: King Arthur's Court in Medieval European Literature*, ed. by Leah Tether and Johnny McFadyen, with Keith Busby and Ad Putter (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 443–59 (p. 450).

9 Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte du Graal*, l. 3236 (p. 1039). My translation. Raffel's translation diverges from the precise meaning of the original French here: 'And he stayed silent too long'; *Perceval*, p. 105.

10 *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français (1330–1500)* version 2015 (DMF 2015). ATILF – CNRS & Université de Lorraine, s. v. *convenir* III. <<http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/convenir>> [accessed 22 May 2020]. See also Barber, *The Holy Grail*, pp. 108–12.

11 The Perceval heroes' silence has been the subject of a large number of discussions. See, for instance, Harry F. Williams, 'The Unasked Questions in the *Conte del Graal*', *Medieval Perspectives*, 3 (1988), 292–302; L. P. Johnson, 'The Grail-Question in Wolfram and Elsewhere', in *From Wolfram and Petrarch to Goethe and Grass: Studies in Literature in Honour of Leonard Forster*, ed. by

meets not a cousin but a foster-sister, and her complaint to him is different.¹² This has implications for our reading of the procession scene in the Welsh tale.

The hero's silence in both the French and Welsh versions has been perceived as a failure, on the part of a hero brought up by a woman, to engage in the chivalric masculine society represented by the absent father figure.¹³ It is the purpose of this article to suggest some alternative possibilities of interpretation, particularly as to whether we have been right to condemn Peredur's silence out of hand.¹⁴ It will be argued here that Peredur does not fail in this episode. His success follows the logic of the narrative, for it is predicted when he first comes to Arthur's court. It also follows the pattern seen in other, native, Welsh tales, such as *Culhwch ac Olwen*, where the hero's arrival at Arthur's court anticipates the success of his subsequent mission. Further, as will be demonstrated below, Peredur's active silence receives not the slightest shadow of a condemnation in the earliest surviving version of the story.¹⁵

The proposed approach is based on a contextual reading of the tale in light of what we might glean of Welsh society and expectations of proper behaviour.¹⁶ It will also be suggested that at least those apparent inconsistencies within the medieval Welsh tale which relate to this episode may be the result of design rather than an accident of compilation (or the product of a redactor's incompetence).¹⁷ The arguments presented here have implications that would introduce additional

D. H. Green et al. (Baden-Baden: Koerner, 1982), pp. 83–102; Stefanie A. Goyette, 'Milk or Blood? Generation and Speech in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval, ou le Conte du Graal*', *Arthuriana*, 26 (2016), 130–51; and discussion and further references in Sayers, 'An Archaic Tale-Type', pp. 86, 91–93, 96.

12 See below, p. 11.

13 See particularly A. Joseph McMullen, 'The Communication of Culture: Speech and the "Grail" Procession in *Historia Peredur vab Efwrc*', *Arthuriana*, 23 (2013), 26–44. For the French, see Goyette, 'Milk or Blood', pp. 136–37, 139. Goyette's argument for the French hero's inability to engage in the knightly society through language links this to the absence of the father figure and, crucially, patronym. Note that for Peredur vab Efwrc the patronym is intact.

14 Even in the French tale, as Sayers notes, we might be left to wonder whether 'in courtly social terms a young guest might venture such questions as are expected from him here'. See Sayers, 'An Archaic Tale-Type', p. 92. I propose that for the Welsh tale the answer to this is in the negative and is dictated by social (though not courtly) convention.

15 For more on the various versions of *Peredur*, see below, pp. 8–9.

16 A similar approach has been applied to this text, with different conclusions, in McMullen, 'The Communication of Culture'. I engage with McMullen's arguments further below.

17 For a parallel argument, see Evan J. Bibbee, 'Reticent romans: silence and writing in *La Vie de Saint Alexis, Le Conte du Graal, and Le Roman de Silence*' (unpublished PhD thesis, Louisiana State University, 2003), p. 74 <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/3768> [accessed 22 May 2020].

nuance to our understanding of the relationship of the Welsh and French texts, which will be discussed in the conclusion.

Preliminary to the analysis, a caveat: it is not the purpose of the present argument to propose any significant revision of the currently dominant view that the Welsh text is heavily influenced by, if not a direct adaptation of, the French, but rather to engage with the two versions of the story from the perspective of ‘relative distance’. The concept, based on an idea expressed by R. L. Thompson in relation to the medieval Welsh *Chwedl Iarlles y Ffynnwawn* ‘Tale of the Lady of the Fountain’, also known as *Owein* (the equivalent of Chrétien’s *Yvain*), was defined and used most effectively by Erich Poppe, and is particularly useful in application to the comparison of Welsh and French versions of the same story, where the exact relationship between the texts is almost impossible to determine.¹⁸ In the case of *Peredur/Conte du Graal*, the relative distance, it will be argued, is greater where the differences in the cultural context within which these texts were produced were more pronounced, and depends on which version of *Peredur* we are looking at. The thorny, and to my mind for the moment largely unanswerable, question of precedence will have to be set aside for the time being. The issue forms a part of a wider discussion of the relationship between the three Welsh tales (sometimes referred to as ‘romances’) of *Owein*, *Gereint* and *Peredur* and their French equivalents. The debate, under the misleading label *Mabinogionfrage*, raged for the better part of the twentieth century.¹⁹ Although very much a chicken-or-the-egg type of question, it has come to a standstill if not quite a conclusion, with the more or less general acceptance that while the exact relationship with Chrétien’s romances differs from one Welsh text to another, the stories in the form in which they have come down to us display various degrees of influence emanating from the French versions.²⁰ The case of *Peredur* is complicated by the existence of several versions of the story attested even in the small number of surviving man-

18 Erich Poppe, ‘*Owein*, *Ystoria Bown*, and the problem of “relative distance”: some methodological considerations and speculations’, *Arthurian Literature* XXI: *Celtic Arthurian Material* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), pp. 73–94; *Owein or Chwedyl Iarlles y Ffynnwawn*, ed. by R. L. Thomson (Dublin: DIAS, 1968), pp. xxviii–xxix.

19 For a brief overview and further references, see Roberts, ‘*Peredur*’, pp. 58–59; Lloyd-Morgan and Poppe, ‘The First Adaptations’, pp. 111–12 and notes on p. 115. An earlier, in-depth, discussion can be found in Doris Edel, ‘The “Mabinogionfrage”: Arthurian Literature between Orality and Literacy’, in *(Re)Oralisierung*, ed. by Hildegard L. C. Tristram (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1996), pp. 311–33.

20 This view facilitates the problematic reading of *Peredur* in the light of the *Conte de Graal*, referred to at the beginning of the present article.

uscript witnesses.²¹ Since the attitude towards Peredur's silence differs between versions, a brief overview of the manuscript tradition is in order.

Peredur survives in four manuscripts, representing different stages in the development of the tale. These show a gradual accretion of material, but it must be noted that the two earliest manuscripts are also fragmentary, containing incomplete copies of the tale.²² The four manuscripts are: Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MSS Peniarth 7 (s. xiii²), Peniarth 14ii (s. xiv¹), Peniarth 4–5 (White Book of Rhydderch, c. 1350) and Oxford, Jesus College, MS 111 (Red Book of Hergest, c. 1382×1400).²³ According to Thomas Charles-Edwards, the texts of the tale preserved in these manuscripts represent three stages in the development of the tale: short (Peniarth 7), to medium (Peniarth 14), to long version (White Book and Red Book), and while in this instance the relative date of the several recensions seems to correspond to the relative date of the manuscripts, these 'are not themselves those recensions', to use Charles-Edwards's words.²⁴ Another theory proposed by Charles-Edwards in the same article, namely that there was a multi-tiered process of alteration, where a text as copied in 'practitioners' books' was more prone to change, but that 'when they were copied by professional scribes, they left traces in higher-class books, which were more likely to survive', is also relevant to the reading of *Peredur* proposed here, and we will return to it below.²⁵

The shortest and earliest iteration of the Welsh tale is preserved in Peniarth 7.²⁶ Damage to the manuscript has caused it to lose the tale's beginning, but it does contain a clear conclusion, with the words: 'Ac y velly y *tervyna* kynnyd paredur ap Efracw' [And so ends the *kynnyd* of Peredur ab Efracw].²⁷ The narra-

21 Lloyd-Morgan, 'Historia Peredur', pp. 147, 150. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between *Peredur* and Chrétien's romance see Goetinck, *Peredur*, pp. 41, 59–80; this should be taken in context of more recent studies referred to above, p. 4, notes 2 and 4.

22 For a summary and details of the manuscript tradition, see Lloyd-Morgan, 'Historia Peredur', pp. 145–47. For detailed discussions of the manuscripts, see Daniel Huws, 'Y pedair llawysgrif canoloesol', in *Canhwyll Marchogion*, pp. 1–9 and Peter Wynn Thomas, 'Cydberthynas y pedair fersiwn canoloesol', in *Canhwyll Marchogion*, pp. 10–49.

23 Lloyd-Morgan, 'Historia Peredur', pp. 145–46.

24 See Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'The Textual Tradition of Medieval Welsh Prose Tales and the Problem of Dating', in *150 Jahre 'Mabinogion' – deutsch-walisische Kulturbeziehungen*, ed. by B. Maier and S. Zimmer, Buchreihe der Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie, 19 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), pp. 23–39 (pp. 24, 28). For a different view, see discussion in Roberts, 'Peredur', p. 60.

25 Charles-Edwards, 'The Textual Tradition', p. 31.

26 For a brief overview and further references, see Lloyd-Morgan, 'Historia Peredur', p. 146.

27 *Historia Peredur vab Efracw*, p. 181; I have expanded the abbreviation. Translation from Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'Migrating Narratives: Peredur, Owain and Geraint', in *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. by Helen Fulton (Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009),

tive presented in this version ends with the marriage between the hero and the Empress of Constantinople. In terms of the episodes that interest us in this discussion, this means that it contains the episode of the procession itself, but not the subsequent references to it.²⁸ Peniarth 14, which lacks the end of that tale, has been argued to contain a version of intermediate length (although given the incomplete nature of the manuscript the full extent of the text remains impossible to determine). The text preserved in this manuscript is interrupted soon after Peredur leaves this uncle's house, where he receives his instruction not to ask unnecessary questions, and it does not contain either the procession or any subsequent episodes. The White Book and the Red Book contain two examples of the longest, expanded version of the tale. The first part of the narrative, preserved in all three versions, follows the story as it is found also in Chrétien's text. This is followed by some episodes elsewhere unattested, which conclude the shorter version. The longer version continues the narrative, again, on lines corresponding to those of Chrétien's text.

The instruction against inquisitiveness is present in all of the surviving versions of the story, but with some notable variation. In the long version, it runs as follows:

[...] a chyt a mi y bydy y wers hon yn dyscu moes a mynut. Ymadaw weithon a ieith dy vam, a mi a uydaf athro it ac a'th urdaf yn varchawc urdawl. O hyn allan, llyna a wnelych; kyt gwelych a vo ryued genhyt, nac amofyn ymdanaw ony byd o wybot y venegi it. Nyt arnat ti y byd y keryd namyn arnaf i, kanys mi yssyd athro it.²⁹

[And you will stay with me for a while, learning manners and etiquette. Forget now your mother's words – I will be your teacher and make you a knight. From now on this is what you must do: if you see something that you think is strange, do not ask about it unless someone is courteous enough to explain it to you. It will not be your fault, but mine, since I am your teacher.]³⁰

In the Peniarth 7 text, which is our only witness to the shortest and earliest version of the tale, the reference is to possible blame for asking a question rather than for

pp. 128–156 (p. 130); as Lloyd-Morgan points out, *kymyd* can be translated both as 'progress' and 'reign following conquest'.

28 For the narrative structure of the *Peredur* story, see, for instance, Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, 'Narrative Structure in *Peredur*', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 38 (1981), 187–231; and most recently Lloyd-Morgan, '*Historia Peredur*', pp. 150–154. For a summary, see Roberts, '*Peredur*', pp. 60–62. For a detailed analysis of earlier discussions of the story's structure, with summaries of the story elements, see Goetinck, *Peredur*, pp. 18–20.

29 *Historia Peredur vab Efracw*, p. 18.

30 *The Mabinogion*, p. 72.

silence.³¹ In Peniarth 14 these instructions appear in the last episode which is contained in the fragmentary manuscript (the text breaks off almost immediately after this scene), and in that version of the instructions even the possibility of blame for silence is lacking.³² In this version, the uncle simply tells Peredur not to ask inappropriate questions.

This injunction against asking a question is not remarked on in most discussions of *Peredur* (except to say that he was following this advice in keeping silent in the procession scene).³³ Joseph A. McMullen argues that Peredur's silence during the procession scene represents a failure that is directly caused by a lack of instruction on the part of his relatives, or this piece of advice by the first uncle, which McMullen qualifies as 'problematic'.³⁴ It must be pointed out, however, that if we are not to refer to the French text for comparison, then the shortest, earliest version of *Peredur* has internal logic. He is instructed to be silent and not to ask questions, follows that advice and receives no criticism for that (in)action. He leaves the castle with permission the following day, with no suggestion of anything having gone wrong.³⁵ This is in stark contrast to the mysterious (and mystical) disappearance of the castle the following morning in the French version.

Inconsistencies only appear in the longer version of *Peredur*, preserved in the White Book and the Red Book, where the procession is mentioned on two further occasions. The shortest version, preserved in Peniarth 7, concludes the story well before those episodes. Because the second earliest and, presumably, fuller version in Peniarth 14 breaks off at an earlier point (before the procession episode), it is uncertain whether it would have contained these references.³⁶

As the manuscript tradition stands, therefore, the two later references to the procession episode only occur in the longer version of the tale, which is widely acknowledged to carry more direct influence by Chrétien's French romance.

31 *Historia Peredur vab Efracw*, p. 163. An edition based on a slightly different transcription, with an English translation, is available in Anthony M. Vitt, '*Peredur vab Efracw*: Edited Texts and Translations of the MSS Peniarth 7 and 14 Versions' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Aberystwyth, 2010), pp. 136–37.

32 *Historia Peredur vab Efracw*, p. 186; Vitt, '*Peredur*', pp. 119–20.

33 The uncle's instructions are not mentioned, for instance, by McMullen in the overview of silence and speech moments in the tale. See McMullen, 'The Communication of Culture', p. 27.

34 McMullen, 'The Communication of Culture', pp. 30, 31.

35 *Historia Peredur vab Efracw*, p. 164; Vitt, '*Peredur*', pp. 140–41. Permission to depart is also received in the longer versions of the Welsh text; *Historia Peredur vab Efracw*, p. 20; *The Mabinogion*, p. 73.

36 According to Charles-Edwards, the Peniarth 14 version occupies an intermediate position between the short early version of Peniarth 7 and the later, longer version preserved in the White Book and Red Book; 'The Textual Tradition', p. 27.

Whereas in the French text, the hero is immediately criticised for not asking any questions in the procession scene, it is worth re-emphasising the point that this issue is not brought up at all in the earliest version of the Welsh text.³⁷ As mentioned above, the foster-sister whom Peredur meets immediately after this does not upbraid him about not asking the questions, nor does she make any reference at all to the procession scene. Instead, she accuses him of causing his own mother's demise by leaving.³⁸ Furthermore, according to the first uncle's original instructions, the implication in the short version seems to be that blame can only be attached to asking inappropriate questions, but not to silence. The situation is the reverse of that of Chrétien's text and of *Peredur's* longer versions.

A possible point of reference for this phenomenon may be found in Welsh law. In the context of his discussion of a possibly ninth-century medieval Welsh poem (which also, presumably coincidentally, happens to feature a severed head) concerning the death of Urien Rheged and the burial of Urien's body, Paul Russell mentions two legal triads which enumerate the types of insult to a corpse.³⁹ The second of these, the *gwarthrud kelein* [dishonourings of a corpse] triad, may also have implications for understanding audience expectations in the plot of *Peredur*. The triad refers to three *gwarthrud* [shames/dishonourings] that may be inflicted on a body through inappropriate questions. The triad runs as follows: 'Teir gwarthrud kelein yw: gofuyn 'pwyladawd hwnn?', a 'phiev yr elor?', a gofuyn 'piev y beth newyd hwnn?' [The three shames of a corpse are asking 'who killed this one?', and 'whose is this bier?', and asking 'whose is this fresh grave?']⁴⁰

As Paul Russell observes, this triad 'has to do with dishonouring and disrespecting the corpse, presumably by turning up at the funeral not knowing who it is and what has happened (the assumption is that you would probably be a kinsman

³⁷ Noted, but not emphasised, by McMullen, 'The Communication of Culture', p. 32.

³⁸ *Historia Peredur vab Efwrawc*, p. 21; *Mabinogion*, p. 73. The reference to this character as Peredur's foster-sister is another indication of the importance of cultural conventions surrounding kinship structures within this text, as fosterage was an important form of artificial kinship in medieval Welsh society. For discussion, see, for instance, Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350–1064* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 298–300.

³⁹ The present article was inspired by reading Paul Russell's 'Three Notes on *Canu Urien*', *North American Journal of Celtic Studies*, 4.1 (2020), 48–78. I am grateful to Professor Russell for his comments on an early draft of this article.

⁴⁰ Quoted and discussed in Russell, 'Three Notes', p. 50. *The Legal Triads of Medieval Wales*, ed. and trans. by Sara Elin Roberts (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), triad X71, pp. 78–79. The reading quoted is of the triad preserved in London, British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra B.v (fourteenth century); versions also survive in other manuscripts; see *ibid.*, pp. 142–43 and discussion on p. 277.

or should at least have done due diligence before turning up at the grave)'.⁴¹ The implication is that a kinsman would be aware of the circumstances of the death. One might add that it was probably also expected of the kinsman to know who had been killed (and their degree of kinship). This is an important point, given the prominence of *galanas* in medieval Welsh law, compensation for killing paid by the perpetrator and his kinsmen to the victim's kinsmen, with degree of kinship determining degree of compensation, with the possibility of vengeance if this were not duly paid.⁴² This situation fits *Peredur* perfectly, as the hero arrives at his uncle's house and is presented with a procession that features a severed head.

Reading *Peredur* with Russell's interpretation of the triad in mind throws light not only on the procession scene, but also on the contrast between his action there and *Peredur*'s later behaviour in a similarly extraordinary situation involving corpses. In the episode of the Sons of the King of Suffering, *Peredur* is confronted with a series of corpses brought back to life using a vat of warm water and precious ointment.⁴³ In this case, he seems to have no qualms about asking what is going on. On the one hand, this might be because these are no longer technically dead bodies. On the other hand, if, as Russell suggests, the injunction in the legal triad applies specifically to kinsmen, then *Peredur* was bound by it only at his uncle's court. The objection may be that the first uncle did not specify that questions would relate specifically to dead kinsmen, but it is necessary to take into account the fact that audience expectations would not be formed by the internal logic of the text only (as ours often have to be, for lack of any other information) but also by their own cultural context. Echoes of the legal triad tradition can be found elsewhere in *Peredur*, particularly in the scene of the hero's first arrival in Arthur's court, where a knight had just struck the queen and snatched a goblet of wine from her hand – two of three ways to insult a queen.⁴⁴ As Michael

⁴¹ Russell, 'Three Notes', p. 50. The remark in brackets is Russell's.

⁴² Dafydd Jenkins, 'Medieval Welsh Idea of Law', *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis/Legal History Review*, 49.3–4 (1981), 323–48 (pp. 327, 329); and specifically in the context of discussions on kinship, Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 182–200. Ben Guy points out that the prominence of genealogy in medieval Wales is connected to these legal practices; *Medieval Welsh Genealogy* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2020), pp. 7–9.

⁴³ This episode is already present in the short version of *Peredur*. See *Historia Peredur vab Efrawc*, p. 46, and comments on p. 101; *The Mabinogion*, p. 88 and comments on p. 248. Both Goetinck and Davies note similarities to the Cauldron of Rebirth in *Branwen*.

⁴⁴ For discussions see Michael Cichon, 'Insult and Redress in Cyfaith Hywel Dda and Welsh Arthurian Romance', *Arthuriana*, 10 (2000), 27–43 (pp. 29–31) and 'Mishandled Vessels: Heaving Drinks and Hurling Insults in Medieval Welsh Literature and Law', *Canadian Journal of History*, 43 (2008), 227–40; Kirsten Lee Over, *Kingship, Conquest, and Patria* (New York, NY: Routledge,

Cichon observes, it is very probable that the latter is a deliberate echo of medieval Welsh law, demonstrating that the audience would have been able to pick up on such references.⁴⁵ This makes it even more likely that another such reference, not noted by Cichon in his discussion, is embedded in the tale in Peredur's behaviour at the sight of (part of) a body at his uncle's court.

Within the shortest version of *Peredur*, therefore, preserved in the oldest manuscript, and possibly representing an early stage in the development of the narrative, the story consistently presents the hero's actions as correct and unobjectionable. The objections, and the inconsistencies, appear only in the longer versions preserved in the White Book and the Red Book, which contain two further references to the procession. The first of these invokes the procession scene when the maiden who arrives at Arthur's court refuses to greet Peredur. She chastises him for not asking the question, but crucially, there is no contradiction as to the legal connotations mentioned above. Although the accusation the maiden lays at Peredur's door is specifically that he did not ask questions, the scene as she invokes it does not contain the head (which, as argued above, was his reason for silence), nor does she mention kinship.

'Pan doethost y lys y brenhin cloff a phan weleist yno y maccwy yn dwyn y gwayw llifeit, ac o vlaen y gwayw dafyn o waet, a hwnnw yn reded yn rayadr hyt yn dwrn y maccwy, ac enryfedodeu ereill, heuyt, a weleist yno, ac ny ofynneisti eu hystyr nac eu hachaws.'⁴⁶

['When you came to the court of the lame king and when you saw there the young man carrying the sharpened spear, and from the tip of the spear a drop of blood streaming down to the young man's fist, and you saw other wonders there, too – you did not question their meaning or their cause.']⁴⁷

The maiden's reference to what appears to be the procession of the *Conte du Graal* rather than that found earlier in *Peredur* has been the subject of some discus-

2005), p. 141; John K. Bollard, 'The structure of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1974–75, 1975), 250–76 (266 n. 32); reprinted in *Mabinogi: A Book of Essays*, ed. by Sullivan (New York, NY: Garland, 1996), pp. 165–96 (195–96 n. 32). Other discussions linking medieval Welsh literary texts with the legal tradition include Robin Chapman Stacey, 'Law and Literature in Medieval Ireland and Wales', in *Medieval Celtic Literature and Society*, ed. by Helen Fulton (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), pp. 65–82 and *Law and the Imagination in Medieval Wales* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), especially p. 21; Paul Russell, 'From Plates and Rods to Royal Drink-Stands in *Branwen* and Medieval Welsh Law', *North American Journal of Celtic Studies*, 1 (2017), 1–26.

⁴⁵ Cichon, 'Insult and Redress', p. 31.

⁴⁶ *Historia Peredur vab Efrawc*, p. 57.

⁴⁷ *The Mabinogion*, p. 94.

sion.⁴⁸ Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan observes that whereas in Peredur's story it is the first, not the second, uncle who was lame (and it is the first uncle who instructs Peredur not to ask questions and the second uncle at whose court the procession takes place), it is the Lamé King who is associated with the procession in Chrétien's story.⁴⁹

Peredur's response to this apparent French narrative import into the story is strikingly formulaic: 'Myn vvg cret, ny chysgaf hun lonyd nes gwybot chwedyl ac ystyr y gwayw y dywawt y vorwyn du ymdanaw'⁵⁰ ['By my faith, I will not sleep in peace until I know the story and significance of the spear about which the black-haired maiden spoke'].⁵¹ The first part of the phrase repeats verbatim the lines spoken by Gwalchmai immediately before: 'Myn vvg cret, ny chysgaf hun lonyd nes gwybot a allwyf ellwg y vorwyn' ['By my faith, I will not sleep in peace until I know whether I can set the maiden free'].⁵² The attention of Gwalchmai and the rest of Arthur's household is on the part of the girl's narrative that tells of a maiden in distress, besieged in her castle, whereas Peredur's interest is in the other part of the story. Whilst I would not wish to press the point too far, it does seem worth noting that the two elements here seem to fall into two categories: imported and native. The first in this pair of elements seems to be a characteristic topos of continental (French) romance, since no maidens in distress are found in those episodes of *Peredur* which are unattested elsewhere, nor are any found in the 'native' Welsh tales.⁵³ The only exception, it may be argued, is Branwen, but her story is not of a maiden in need of rescue but of a formal insult in need of recompense, with distinct echoes again in the native legal tradition.⁵⁴ Meanwhile,

48 See, for instance, the note in *The Mabinogion*, p. 249; Lloyd-Morgan, 'Historia Peredur', pp. 147–48; Roberts, 'Peredur', p. 65. Note that McMullen's discussion contains an error at this point: in the text there are two lads carrying the spear, not three: 'The Communication of Culture', p. 33.

49 Lloyd-Morgan, 'Historia Peredur', p. 148.

50 *Historia Peredur vab Efracw*, p. 58.

51 *The Mabinogion*, p. 95.

52 *Historia Peredur vab Efracw*, p. 58; *The Mabinogion*, p. 95.

53 For a brief overview of episodes unique to the Welsh text, see Lloyd-Morgan, 'Historia Peredur', p. 148 and Lowri Morgans, 'Peredur son of Efracw: The Question of Translation and/or Adaptation', in *A Handbook of Arthurian Romance*, pp. 403–14 (pp. 409–10); for discussions of some of these episodes, see references in n. 73 below. The second countess whose magic balsam cures the hero's madness in *Owein* might be construed as a maiden-in-distress, but the episode has a French equivalent in Chrétien's *Chevalier au lion*; *Owein*, pp. 21–24; *The Mabinogion*, pp. 131–33.

54 This may be pure coincidence, but *Branwen* also contains the only instance of *llonyd* used with the negative outside of *Peredur* that I can find in the prose tales: 'A nachaf y dygyuor yn Iwerdon hyt nat oed lonyd idaw ony chaei dial y sarhaet; Branwen uerch Lyr', ed. by D. S. Thomson (Dublin: DIAS, 1961), l. 217; ['And there was such an uproar in Ireland that there was no peace for Matholwch until he avenged the insult'] (*The Mabinogion*, p. 27). Disquiet (translated by Davies

Peredur's attention is drawn to the personal insult in the girl's speech, and the words he uses are *chwedl* and *ystyr*. These words signify 'story' and 'significance', as in Sioned Davies's translation, but are also the terms used in the Welsh manuscripts to describe the tales themselves: the story of *Owein* is a *chwedl* and that of *Peredur*, a *historia* or *ystoria*.⁵⁵

Giving the competence of the compilers and copyists the benefit of the doubt, we might make sense of the long version of the story as it stands if we assume that the difference between the scene at the uncle's house and the later summaries is clear not only to us, but intentionally made so for the audience. It is also worth asking the question of whether there is a contradiction between the accusation levelled here against Peredur and his uncle's earlier assurance that all blame would be deflected from the student to the teacher. Perhaps asking questions about the head would have been inappropriate, but should he have asked about the spear?

Alternatively, the long version of Peredur may represent the type of attempt to bring together and reconcile various versions of the text which have been found in other Welsh texts preserved in the same manuscripts. The examples that spring to mind are the two openings of the *Ystoria Bown* and the two versions of the encyclopedic text *Delw y Byd*, both of which in turn feature miscellaneous fragments added after the conclusion of the text from what is very clearly yet another set of different versions.⁵⁶ The above examples of this patchwork type of collation

as 'no peace') here is associated with insult [*sarhaed*] that requires redress. Insult, whether the maiden's to Peredur or his own earlier avoidance of inappropriate question to avoid insult, is, I would argue, also the dominant theme in these episodes of *Peredur*. The only other example of the word, in a positive sense this time, is in *Pwyll*: 'Y'r llys y doethant, a threulaw y nos honno a orugant drwy gerdeu a chyuedach, ual y bu llonyd ganthunt; Pwyll Pendeuc Dyuet', ed. by R. L. Thomson (Dublin: DIAS, 1957), ll. 258–61; [They came to the court, and spent that night singing and carousing, until they were contented] (*The Mabinogion*, p. 10). There are a number of further instances of the word in translated texts, in *Cynghorau Catwn*, the Welsh translation of *Disticha Catonis* in Peniarth 3ii (c.1275–1325), fol. 39, but a full discussion is beyond the scope of the present article. For the transcript of the manuscript, and other instances of *llonyd* in medieval Welsh prose (all, apart from those discussed above, from translated texts), see Diana Luft, Peter Wynn Thomas and D. Mark Smith, eds, *Rhyddiaith Gymraeg 1300–1425* (2013) <<http://www.rhyddiaithganoloesol.caerdydd.ac.uk>> [accessed 1 November 2020].

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the terminology, see, for instance, Brynley F. Roberts, 'Ystoria', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 26 (1974), 13–20.

⁵⁶ *Selections from Ystoria Bown o Hamtwn*, ed. by Erich Poppe and Regine Reck (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. xii–xiii, 43; Erich Poppe and Regine Reck, 'A French romance in Wales: *Ystoria Bown o Hamtwn*: Processes of Medieval Translations. Part I', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 55 (2006), 122–80 (pp. 145–50); *Delw y Byd. A Medieval Welsh Encyclopedia*, ed. by Natalia I. Petrovskaja (London: MHRA, 2020), pp. 7, 11, 18–23.

come from our two manuscripts which contain the longer version of *Peredur*. This brings us ultimately to the theory of multiple layers proposed by Charles-Edwards, who suggests that the manuscript tradition of *Peredur* illustrates the multi-layered fluidity of Welsh texts, where high-end manuscripts produced by professional scribes might contain traces of alterations undergone by the more fluid layer of the tradition, in professionals' books.⁵⁷ The White Book and Red Book are high-end manuscripts, and these multiple versions of (sections of) the texts are examples of the same phenomenon.

In the final reference to the procession scene, which occurs during another encounter with the 'maiden', who turns out not to be a 'black-haired maiden' at all, but 'a yellow-haired lad', who had pretended to be a girl, the head is once more mentioned (but there is still only one lad carrying the spear, rather than the original two).⁵⁸ The head turns out to be a cousin. This suggests once more that *Peredur's* silence was justified after all, and indeed, no more accusation is brought against him for not asking any questions, nor are these even mentioned. Instead, vengeance is requested and thereafter performed.

Given the correspondences between the latter two descriptions of the scene and the French, as opposed to the Welsh, version of the story, it seems probable that these references are indeed the result of influence exerted on our narrative by the French text. The similarities between the composition of the longer version of *Peredur* and the multi-version patchworks attested in the same manuscripts, mentioned above, suggest the possibility that multiple versions of the tale were brought together here. The process of alteration is visible in the correlation observed between the two elements: the head and the criticism. When the head is mentioned, *Peredur* is not criticised for his silence. Conversely, when the head is not mentioned, *Peredur* is criticised.

The tantalising possibility raised by reading the text, in both shorter and longer versions, in the light of the Welsh legal tradition, is that *Peredur's* mistake was a specifically cultural one, and only existed in the longer version of the story. This does not necessitate any assumptions about the redactors of the tale necessarily using Welsh law specifically, but rather follows Robin Chapman Stacey's suggestion 'that both legal and literary genres might have been part of a common and constantly evolving narrative tradition'.⁵⁹ The only conjecture required, and one that is founded on ample evidence from this and other medieval Welsh prose narratives, is that the redactors and audiences shared the cultural background

⁵⁷ Charles-Edwards, 'The Textual Tradition', p. 31.

⁵⁸ *Historia Peredur vab Efracw*, p. 69; *The Mabinogion*, p. 102.

⁵⁹ Stacey, *Law and the Imagination*, p. 23.

and knowledge of customs that were also codified in the laws which we have surviving. If not asking questions about bodies in a kinsman's house was part of custom codified by law, as the triad, in Russell's interpretation, implies, it seems reasonable to expect that a medieval Welsh audience would be aware of this custom and recognise it in Peredur's behaviour. Peredur had received general instructions not to ask questions, and further sees a head in a kinsman's house. The audience may have been equally curious about the story, but also aware of a taboo on questions in this particular setting. Audience expectations and context are, therefore, key.

Peredur's silence and his uncle's instructions may therefore be read as an avoidance of inappropriate questions, dictated by custom, rather than as an expression of the silence of the colonised voice as proposed by McMullen.⁶⁰ McMullen, quoting Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o on the intricate connections between language and culture, argues that Peredur fails because he is not communicating and not sharing in his culture.⁶¹ However, such a reading has three presuppositions. The first, perhaps least problematic, is that the knowledge or understanding of the connection between cultural expression through language and external (colonial) domination is a universal staple, and is automatically expressed by medieval writers. The second presupposition offers the complementary or alternative possibility, that the medieval authors/redactors of the tale, who were responsible for these narrative elements, were aware of the role of communication in culture generally. The third presupposition is that the lack of cultural communication, or to use the terminology introduced to the field of postcolonial studies by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the 'silence' of the 'subaltern', would have been understood as a problem relevant to the situation of Wales in the thirteenth or fourteenth century (whenever we think this tale was being actively formed in transmission).⁶²

⁶⁰ See p. 10 above. McMullen, 'Communication of Culture', p. 35. The purpose here is not to argue against McMullen's interpretation of the story, but to suggest the possibility of a different, complementary, reading. *Peredur* has received analysis from the postcolonial perspective in a number of recent studies. See, for instance, Kirsten Lee Over, 'Transcultural Change: Romance to *rhamant*', in *Medieval Celtic Literature and Society*, pp. 183–204 and Susan L. Aronstein, 'Becoming Welsh: Counter-colonialism and the negotiation of native identity in Peredur vab Efracw', *Exemplaria*, 17 (2005), 135–68.

⁶¹ McMullen, 'Communication of Culture', p. 35–36; with reference to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986), pp. 15–16.

⁶² The term I use here is from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential 1988 essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313. For a brief overview of Subaltern Studies, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial*

Leaving aside the first two presuppositions, which to my mind cannot be proven or disproven within the available space or with the available material, I propose to focus on the third. The most immediate problem with this, and one which McMullen addresses with dexterity, is that this tale of presumed cultural silence of the colonized subject is itself an expression of the culture of that same colonized subject.⁶³ According to McMullen, ‘the redactor may be intending to remind his audience about how necessary communication is, especially if, by communicating, a family is also bestowing cultural values onto its youngest members’.⁶⁴ The preoccupation with culture seems very modern, but, in any case, it is not a concern unique to a colonial situation (and neither is the concern with teaching the young).

The dissonance in the application of the postcolonial framework to *Peredur* in the context of loss of sovereignty and the silencing of the colonial subject becomes apparent if we go back to the beginnings of postcolonial studies and read the text alongside Spivak’s essay, foundational for the field’s methodologies.⁶⁵ She gives several examples of what she terms the ‘epistemic violence’ done to the study of the colonial subject, and one of these is the colonial narrative of the codification of Hindu law.⁶⁶ Her other, most often quoted example, is of the women involved in the rite that has acquired in the colonial discourse the name of *suttee* and by which it is now mostly known in the West.⁶⁷ These women, as Spivak shows, have no say in the story, as their voices are irrecoverable in either the colonial British narrative, or in what she designates as the ‘Indian nativist argument’.⁶⁸ The first example is particularly interesting in its associations with law, because, in our Welsh tale, the Welsh laws are very visible, regardless of whether the interpretation of *Peredur*’s attitude to inappropriate questions proposed here is accepted or not.⁶⁹ The contrast, however, between the examples of the silencing of the colo-

Thought and Historical Difference (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 11–16.

⁶³ McMullen, ‘Communication of Culture’, p. 36, particularly in comments about the Welsh manuscript production of the period.

⁶⁴ McMullen, ‘Communication of Culture’, p. 37.

⁶⁵ I use the term sovereignty here in the conventional sense, without the implications of the ‘Sovereignty Theory’; for a discussion of its applicability to *Peredur*, see Natalia I. Petrovskaja, ‘Dating *Peredur*. New Light on Old Problems’, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 29 (2009), 223–43 (pp. 223–24).

⁶⁶ Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, pp. 281–82.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

⁶⁹ See discussions referred to in n. 44 above.

nial subject given by Spivak, and the case of Peredur, is considerable. Peredur may be silent (and my argument is that he has good reason) but the text *Peredur* is not silent at all, and not only speaks, but does so in its own native language. The narrative we are presented with is itself, to some extent at least, the voice of the subaltern (but see the caveat below), irrespective of what might be said of any scholarly discussion of the text written in English.

This marks another point at which the application of Spivak's or any other postcolonialist theory to the study of the literary production of the medieval period breaks down, because in dealing with medieval texts we are by default dealing with the elite.⁷⁰ For Spivak, 'the floating buffer zone of the regional elite-subaltern, is a *deviation* from an *ideal* – the people or subaltern – which is itself defined as a difference from the elite'.⁷¹ For the study of medieval literature, whether in the colonial context or not, the 'regional elite-subaltern' is for the most part the only visible subaltern. Beyond that is, in Aaron Gurevich's terms, the 'silent multitude'.⁷² The real subaltern, ultimately, as Spivak pointed out, remains silent.

The solution may be to see *Peredur* not as a colonial production, but as a dual production. The complicated manuscript history of the tale with its shifting relative distance to the French text, may here be rather a help than a hindrance. Taking only the longer version of the text in the postcolonial framework, with the imposition of the later episodes as an external influence of the colonial world (which serve to narrow the 'relative distance' between the Welsh and French versions), releases the earlier part of the tale from the constraints of the fallacies inherent in the application of this framework and of its reading in light of the French text. The episode of the procession itself is not a colonial experience for anyone. Peredur's silence is not inaction. Peredur acts: he avoids causing insult by asking inappropriate questions about a body in a kinsman's house. Within

70 For classifications of different types of elite in the colonial reality, see Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', pp. 283–85. The idea of the subaltern subject that 'cannot speak' (*ibid.*), is relevant to medieval studies, as most of what we know about medieval culture is mediated through texts produced by dominant elites; the idea was voiced, among others, in a publication contemporary to Spivak's foundational work, in the analysis of medieval popular culture in Aaron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture. Problems of Belief and Perceptions*, trans. by János M. Bak and Paul A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), originally published in Russian as *Проблемы средневековой народной культуры* (Moscow: Искусство, 1981). For a reading of Gurevich in the context of subaltern studies, see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 109.

71 Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', p. 285. Spivak's emphasis.

72 The term 'silent multitude' is in the subtitle of the Russian edition of the book: *культура безмолствующего большинства* [culture of the silent multitude/majority] (translation mine). А. Я. Гуревич, *Средневековый Мир. Культура безмолствующего большинства* [Medieval world. Culture of the silent multitude/majority] (Moscow: Искусство, 1990).

the text, he is not the silent colonial subject, but a recognisable member of the culture acting in a way that the intended audience of the text would understand. The shortest, earliest version of the text preserved in the Peniarth 7 manuscript contains no accusation, no criticism of this action. Indeed, it is also worth noting that *Peredur* is particularly rich in inexplicable events and encounters that remain unexplained and unqueried within the text. Most of these are unique to the Welsh tale.⁷³ Thus, the procession scene is also no exception in terms of narrative expectations.

The criticism of this Welsh behavioural pattern is only introduced in the episode which is very clearly added in the longer version and is inspired by the French text (narrowing the relative distance between the two versions). As mentioned above, this omits any reference to kinship. When kinship is once again introduced at the end of the tale, conversely no reference is made to the previous criticism of the silence. One possible interpretation is offered by the widely accepted view of the tale as a composite product, consisting of a number of episodes of different origins that would have been performed separately and did not require a tight structure.⁷⁴ The evidence of the other multi-version texts preserved in medieval Welsh manuscripts seems to support this view.

The second possibility is to return to a post-colonial reading of the tale, but one that does not require the medieval audience to perceive themselves as colonial subjects to any greater extent than an awareness of the increased prevalence of foreign influences and imported customs might afford. With an outline of this reading, I will conclude this discussion.

The contrast between *Peredur*'s avoidance of questions, perfectly correct under Welsh law, on the one hand, and the courtly environment of much of the rest of the tale on the other, seems to show rather than tell the same stark contrast between Welsh and (Anglo-Norman) French so sharply portrayed in Chrétien's romance. If we consider that the Welsh audience would have perceived *Peredur*'s action as correct in the original scene, until the revelation of the cousin's tale at the end (in a description of the procession that notoriously echoes the French rather than the Welsh version of the narrative), the hybrid nature of the tale as it is preserved may be seen in a different light. It might be worth considering the possibility that the apparent inconsistencies are the product not of a loss in transmission,

⁷³ Examples of this include the empress episode, and the episode of the valley of changing sheep. For a discussion of the former, see Petrovskaia, 'Dating *Peredur*'; for the latter, see K. Calis, 'Peredur and the Valley of Changing Sheep' (unpublished MA thesis, Utrecht University, 2018), <<https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/367824>> [accessed 22 May 2020].

⁷⁴ See, for instance, discussions in Lloyd-Morgan, '*Historia Peredur*', pp. 151–52.

nor of incompetence on the part of any redactor(s) or complier(s), but of a contrast and conflict between Welsh and French cultures made visible in a narrative's very structure.⁷⁵ Given the penchant of medieval Welsh storytellers for triadic structures, it may not be an accident that the scene is repeated three times in the text, with variations.⁷⁶ In the first iteration, Peredur was right, as a Welshman, not to ask questions about the head, for reasons outlined above. In the second iteration, Peredur was wrong, in a court anchored in continental culture, not to ask questions about the distress of his hosts. In the third iteration, Peredur's behaviour in the original scene is ultimately irrelevant, and only his future action of vengeance matters. With the action ending in Gloucester, where the revenge takes place, one is tempted to speculate whether the triad of Welsh-French-Marcher that becomes visible in this structure is not rather intentional than fortuitous.⁷⁷ In the light of the importance of the marcher lords of Gloucester to the politics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including the many instances of clashes between the English kings and Welsh rulers, the use of the place-name in connection to ideas of treachery and vengeance is probably no accident. To give but one example, a number of Welsh rulers who had attended the council at Gloucester in 1175 were in subsequent years victims of ambush (even when travelling under safe passage from the English king).⁷⁸ I do not propose this event as a specific reference point

75 This might be called a postcolonial reading of the tale; cf. discussion in McMullen, 'Communication of Culture', p. 34.

76 Examples include the three sets of trades practiced by the heroes in *Manawydan*, the Third Branch of the *Mabinogi*, and the three journeys to the fountain undertaken by Cynon, Owein and Arthur in *Owein*. For *Manawydan*, see discussion in Ian Hughes, 'Tripartite Structure in *Manawydan Uab Llyr*', in *Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica*, ed. by Mícheál Ó Flaithearta (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2007), pp. 99–109. See also *Owein*, pp. 2, 24 and 21; *The Mabinogion*, pp. 117, 133 and 131, and discussion in Natalia I. Petrovskaia, 'Où va-t-on pour son aventure? Mondes connus et mondes inconnus dans le roman chevaleresque au Moyen Âge', in *Ce qui advient... les déclinaisons de l'aventure*, ed. by D. Buschinger, M. Olivier, T. Kuhnle, F. Gabaude, M-G Grossel and P. Levron, *Medievales*, 67 (Amiens: Presses du Centre d'études médiévales de Picardie, 2018), pp. 160–69 (pp. 163–66).

77 The distinction between Wales, England and the March is particularly important in terms of the application of law; see Sara Elin Roberts, "'By the Authority of the Devil": The Operation of Welsh and English Law in Medieval Wales', in *Authority and Subjugation in Writing of Medieval Wales*, ed. by Ruth Kennedy and Simon Meecham-Jones (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 85–97 (p. 91).

78 See discussion in Seán Duffy, 'Henry II and England's Insular Neighbours', in *Henry II: New Interpretations*, ed. by C. Harper-Bill and Nicholas Vincent (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2007), pp. 129–53 (pp. 149–50). None of the murders discussed by Duffy took place in Gloucester itself, and may not provide any base for identification of the possible allusion in *Peredur*, but these events do provide a suggestive context.

for the narrative, but rather as an illustration of the type of associations the place-name may have invoked for the medieval Welsh audience.

One further note must be added in conclusion to this discussion. The interpretation of Peredur's silence as a perfectly acceptable avoidance of inappropriate questions, dictated by Welsh social order and customs, has an implication that has the potential to disturb the established paradigm. Peredur vab Efracw, in Wales, acts in accordance with law and custom in remaining silent at the sight of a head at a relative's house. Perceval, known as *li galois* ['the Welshman'], acts inappropriately in the French courtly context of Chrétien's narrative, by remaining silent in exactly the same way. As has been noted in many discussions of the French romance, the epithet *galois* in the *Conte du Graal* seems to be associated with ignorance, simplicity, stupidity (and is thus both racial and racist, to use modern terminology).⁷⁹ Given the generalising nature of an ethnonym, this seems to imply a general condemnation of Welsh behavioural patterns as inappropriate or inadequate to the society described in the French romance, rather than a criticism of Perceval individually. If that is the case, it seems more logical to see the interpretation of the hero's silence in the French text as post-dating the act of silence itself. In other words, the possibility arises that faced with this act of silence, Chrétien introduced the need to ask a question, and subsequent condemnation of the hero. This agrees with Richard Barber's interpretation of the Grail scene in Chrétien's text. Barber postulates that 'Perceval mistakes Gorneman's instructions not to be inquisitive as an absolute ban on the asking of questions', and that the function of the Grail procession in the narrative is to provide a scene where not only would questions need to be asked, but where the audience would wish for them to be asked.⁸⁰ If the instructions were a given in the original form of the narrative, the introduction of the condemnation of the hero's silence, following (new) audience expectations, formed without awareness of the Welsh laws that had conditioned the original instructions, makes sense. This also requires fewer conditionals than the supposition that, faced with a story of a Welshman's silence judged inappropriate in a French context and which would also have no explanation in a Welsh one, a Welsh redactor responsible for the earliest version of *Peredur* removed the condemnation, replaced the 'Grail' with a head to justify the silence, and then proceeded to introduce a large number of other episodes

⁷⁹ See, for example, Goyette, 'Milk or Blood?', especially pp. 132, 141; Tony Davenport, 'Wales and Welshness in Middle English Romances', in *Authority and Subjugation*, pp. 137–58 (p. 141); Davenport refers to the more extensive discussion in Rupert T. Pickens, *The Welsh Knight: Paradoxicality in Chrétien's Conte del Graal* (Lexington, KY: French Forum Publishers, 1977), pp. 113–17.

⁸⁰ Barber, *The Holy Grail*, p. 93.

where the hero also encounters strange things and also asks for no explanation. The relationship between the Welsh and French texts, and the relative distance between them, depends on which version of the Welsh text we take. We therefore seem to be back to the supposition that there would have been an original Welsh Peredur story, similar in form to the short version preserved in Peniarth 7, which then made its way to France, and subsequently came back with Chrétien's additions, to influence in turn the longer versions of the Welsh tale which we now have in the White Book and the Red Book. This may not provide an answer to the chicken-or-the-egg problem of the *Mabinogionfrage*, but it does reinforce the need to take into account the fact that the Grail story chicken, before it crossed the Channel into Wales, may also have hatched from a Welsh egg.