Response: “In Two Fields, A Reconciliation”
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We have explicated the title of our session today, “Mewn Dau Gae,” as “between two fields,” but I like “in two fields” better. In the poem from whence our session title derives, the Welsh bardd gwlad Waldo Williams recounts a mystical revelation he has experienced, using that vision to explore the anxiety, the ambivalence, and ultimately, the beauty, of the sacred and the profane; the light and the dark; the individual and the collective; the relationship between the land that nurtures the nation and the humans who tend it (“it,” here, intentionally an ambivalent referent both to “land” and to “nation,” the ambiguity allowing for farmers tending the land and soldiers tending the nation, offering still greater and richer interpretative options.) Waldo, as poet, does not vassillate between these concepts, but dwells in all of them; does not vassillate between the meanings of the words he has chosen, but dwells in all of them. This is a poem of integration.

Typically, readers of this poem, particularly those reading it in Welsh, and especially those for whom Welsh is not a native language, experience a degree of insecurity in the venture. Such insecurity is natural not merely because of language barriers, but also because “Mewn Dau Gae” records a sublime moment of instability and uncertainty; any security to be found in reading this poem is not derived from a certain understanding of what lies between the fields, but rather, a valuing of what lies in them--both what can be seen and understood, and what can only be known without the senses or language. To be an authority on this poem, to approach it respectfully, its readers must, in fact, surrender the idea of possessing security in its meaning in favor of exploring and, more importantly, of appreciating, the poem’s ambiguities.

With “Mewn Dau Gae,” security does not rest in remaining between the fields, but rather by entering into, and embracing entirely, an integrated, sublime state. Waldo, a mystic poet of the folk, does not seek to draw a line between these fields and their contents, does not seek to compare these worlds, but rather, seeks, and asks his readers to seek, to reconcile them. We, the scholars of Celtic and Old English studies who have developed and presented this session of papers today, likewise do not seek to draw a line between these fields and their contents, do not seek to compare them, but rather, seek, and ask our audience today to seek, to reconcile them--to bring them together to think with, and through, and in. The papers presented in this session provide us with excellent means to do so.

Daniel’s paper brings together two fields--literary and queer studies--and two concerns: queer positionality and authority. Waldo’s twentieth-century immersion in the mystical language of visions and his efforts to reconcile those visions with lived reality is mirrored by--indeed, perhaps directly influenced by--the immersion of medieval Norse and Celtic poets in the language of social narratives--mythologies, cosmologies, propaganda designed to urge an audience to think of itself as a cohesive nation. Inhabiting a liminal, interstitial social position, medieval poets were the guardians of memory and myth, the keepers of law and geneology; and the critics of socio-political concerns, weaving their knowledge into their texts and, through their texts, into the fabric of their communities. Doing this work well, in turn, could in some cases--most notably,
as Daniel has described here, in the case of Taliesin—lead to the poet’s becoming himself one of those quasi-mythological figures embroidered into a particular world view, becoming a figure who reconciles the world in his very figuration.

Taliesin, thus queered, becomes the embodiment of poet’s power, his authority in turn authorizing, in the composition of the poems and tales in which he features, the authority of the poet—an authority that ultimately extends to Waldo and, through him, in ways not yet satisfactorily examined, to the readers and scholars who explore and appreciate his work. This observation leads us back to the excellent overarching question Daniel poses in his paper: “what is the state of the relationship between queer positioning and authority today?” I might also reframe the question slightly and more specifically: what is the state of the relationship between queer positioning and authority in the Celtic and Old English fields today? That is, how can thinking not between, but in, various modes of being—thinking queerly, rather than in field-specific ways—enhance our work and shed new light on the texts we work with?

Considering this question of queerness and authority, we can naturally and quite profitably also turn to Sam’s account of the forged narratives of antiquarian Edward Williams, self-styled Iolo Morganwg, and the ways in which this writer also creates authority by authorizing others through his work—work which, because not entirely historical, nor entirely fictional, nor entirely authentic, nor entirely fabricated, can be deemed “queer” as Daniel has set up the term for us. Where Williams’s contemporaries viewed him as an expert on medieval Welsh literature, later scholars and critics have worked to recover the true historical Welsh literary tradition from his forgery handiwork. Yet, in the meantime, the materials he collected and produced have continued to influence and shape the Welsh literary landscape. If, as some scholars have suggested, we set aside the works he forged as “inauthentic,” we lose a large piece of the literary quilt they have helped to produce and promote—and to what effect in Welsh literary studies? This is similar to the concern raised in English literary studies as to whether or not Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia Regum Britanniae should be viewed as historical, or should be set aside as “inauthentic”—an issue upon which rests the fate of the entirety of the “historical” corpus of Arthurian works. Where does the authority in these cases rest—with the writer, with the reader, with the critics, with the texts? We might think of these several possibilities as their own form of chwedleu porth—every response to them potential for a different path, a different way of understanding, and a different means of exploration and appreciation.

What is at stake, and what are the critical payoffs, if as literary scholars we allow ourselves to relinquish the quest for secure knowledge of “the truth,” of “facts” in medieval narratives, and embrace instead their ambiguities, their historical inaccuracies, and the poetic license which produced them, on their own terms? Terri’s paper adroitly addresses that question. Embroidering contemporary dynastic crises and their accompanying economic impact into the historical frame of the Conquest, the twelfth-century author of the Gesta Herwardi performs all of the functions of the poet noted in Daniel’s paper—guarding and shaping cultural memory and mythology, preserving laws, kinships and genealogies, and criticizing the great socio-political concerns of his time and place. Significantly, working as a monk and thus, not part of the social
systems he is recording and criticizing, this author writes from the perspective not of the Anglo-Norman ruling class, but of the English lower landholders, using his poetic authority (and the authority of the Church and of God’s divine influence) to confer authority within the poetic realm he is at liberty—indeed, obligated, as poet—to shape. Surely, this narrative can be read as a queering of history, and a queering of contemporary socio-political concerns? In such a reading, does the queering in fact confer the intended authority to the English landholders, embodied and symbolized by Hereward and his companions? Does it, to paraphrase and reframe Sam’s words, reconfigure the perilous expedition of Hereward into a poetic journey, rendering him a hero translated into a poet who thus confers authority back to the conquered English landowners? Is Hereward effectively a porter unlocking the gate to reclaimed status?

The answer to that question might initially seem to be a straightforward “yes,” until we consider that in Paul Kingsnorth’s 2014 novel *The Wake*, as Terri notes, the Hereward story is adapted in ways that show the English lower landholders to certainly have a claim, but ultimately, no authority actually to press that claim. In this novel, the gate to reconciliation ultimately remains closed and locked. The noted parallels of the twelfth-century crisis to the Conquest narrative as framed in the *Gesta Herwardi*, the noted influence of the *Gesta Herwardi* upon *The Wake*, and the noted similarities of Bucman et al’s situation in that novel to the Occupy Wall Street movement contemporary to it, suggest that at least for Kingsnorth, writing medievalism that borrows heavily from the socio-historical paradigms developed by medieval poets including those these papers have examined today, the relationship between queer positioning and authority cannot be divorced from the power structures that produce and challenge them. To explore and appreciate such questions and issues, we must be willing to set aside our need for security and to embrace the far greater (and, I think, more rewarding) challenge of reading into the ambiguities, into the queer spaces, and into the unstable literary histories, for their meanings. We must seek to integrate and reconcile, rather than to sort and compare.

And so, to conclude these remarks, I wish to return briefly to Waldo, and his wonderful “Mewn Dau Gae.” At the end of the poem, perhaps among the most famous lines in Welsh poetry, Waldo tells us (and here, I resort to the English translation for those in the audience not versed in Welsh):

[...] it will come, the dawn of his longed-for coming,  
And what a dawn to long for. He will arrive, the outlaw,  
The huntsman, the lost heir making good his claim  
To no-man’s land, the exiled king  
Is coming home one day; the rushes sweep aside  
To let him through.”¹

¹ As translated by Rowan Williams, and located on the Cymdeithas Waldo Williams website: http://www.waldowilliams.com/?page_id=865&lang=en
This polysemic figure might, in the context of our session, be read as the unknown wanderer—the bard, the antiquarian, the exile, the scholar, seeking entry; lucky for him, in this poem the gates are unlocked and thrown open to welcome him and allow him to continue his journey. But for many of us, Old English and Celtic scholars, alike, so many literary and historical gates seem to remain firmly closed and locked. Where are the porters to unlock these gates that remain, hindering our scholarly journeys?

After careful consideration, I think, perhaps, that instead of looking for them, we must acknowledge that we are those porters, and that it is our responsibility and privilege to be charged with the forward-motion of the narratives of our fields. But, as Sam points out to us, porter—albeit important, indeed, almost essential—is not an easy job. Porters create possibilities. Possibilities are born of options. Options are born of not-knowing. We are back to the question of security versus ambiguity. To open the gates, to truly explore and appreciate the narratives with which we think, we must seek to integrate and reconcile, rather than sort and compare, our knowledge of the literatures and cultures of medieval Britain. We should do that work together, “mewn dau gae” in (our) two fields, rather than dividing the work—and its rewards—between our fields. We should queer our positions, blurring the boundaries between Old English and Celtic studies, positioning ourselves together, rather than separately, and demanding that authority be conferred through approaches that privilege interdisciplinary possibility over discipline-specific certainty, honesty that we don’t and can’t know some things over insistence that we ought to, and insistence that exploration and appreciation be the tools of the trade. What a truly rich journey, brim-full with possibilities, overwhelmingly sublime, such a porter-partnership could be.