

Early Cyclical Narrative: The Biographical *Romans* of *Peredur* and *Lanzelet*

A narrative cycle is by definition a combination of different, often preexisting, tales. While sometimes these tales are presented as separate and autonomous, more often they have been integrated into a unified structure, so that one of the first tasks for the scholar is to recognize and identify the original tales, not purely because of concerns for erudition but in order to better understand how the medieval storyteller's mind worked. When the incorporated tales no longer exist as separate entities, however, identifying the components of a cyclical account is in itself no small challenge, since there seem to be no generally accepted criteria or safe guidelines in this area. It suffices to mention the different ways in which composite works such as the Welsh *Peredur* and German *Lanzelet* have been analysed. The current notions of narrative models are useful for gaining a more rigorous insight into our understanding of what a tale is, and may help in assessing the components of a cyclical narrative. If possible, however, one should begin with an investigation of the kind of tales which were narrated in the period immediately preceding that when these compilations were made. What is significant is that the process of combining usually leaves traces in these works at the level of discourse. These traces can then be used as evidence to support the various hypotheses made by the interpreters concerning the origins of the tales. This is, at least, what I found in my attempts to identify the components of *Lanzelet*, *Peredur*, *Bel Inconnu*, *Yvain*.

Even more interesting is, however, in my view, a question related to the capacity of a story, as of any literary work, to contain embedded in itself the sociocultural values of the group in which they originated, and to produce a meaning which is, normally, closely related to the dominant sociocultural values underpinning the tale (I am referring here to the model elaborated by Cesare Segre who distinguishes in any given literary work the four levels of "discourse", "fabula", "anthropological material" and "narrative model"). It is well known, on the other hand, that once they have gained a certain popularity, stories continue to live and to be told to subsequent ages and to societies with sociocultural values quite different from those of the group in which the tales originated (the literary tradition is viewed as a "superstructure", possessing an autonomy and a force of its own). If this is true, it is very likely that a narrative cycle combines tales of different periods and cultural

origin. The challenge was, therefore, to link convincingly the disparate material in an intentionally coherent story. Thus, the dynamics between the sociocultural values and meaning of the original tales and the sociocultural values and meaning of the works which use them appear particularly complex. This is all the more true since the “meaning” of a literary work is often sought not in elements of “content” but in the structural organization of the texts. Arthurian and Carolingian narratives provide particularly abundant examples of these processes, such as when tales of ancient Celtic or German origin were adopted and necessarily transformed by clerks with classical education writing for a French or Anglonorman feudal society in the 12th and 13th centuries.

In the discussion of these topics, I would like to focus on two examples of composite narrative dating from the very early 13th century: the Welsh anonymous novel of *Peredur* and the German poem *Lanzelet* (derived from a lost French poem) by Ulrich von Zatzikhoven. Both works can be construed as biographical *romans* built entirely through combining earlier stories, upon which a nominally coherent structure has been superimposed. Although the degree of intervention is higher in the German poem, the techniques for the reelaboration of the material are similar: preexisting tales are broken apart, so as to insert new material between the two parts; episodes which appear late in the novel are anticipated or announced by details found in an earlier part of the narrative; the sequence of the hero’s adventures is organized in such a way that there is a sense of progression, culminating in the final episode. The structuring of the material, however, is never so skillful as to dispel the impression that autonomous and originally independent stories have been artificially drawn together. It is possible, for example, to recognize in *Lanzelet* at least one preexisting narration about the abduction and rescue of Guinevere, and in *Peredur* three complete tales, besides the sequence that follows Chrétien’s *Perceval* (“Peredur and Angharad Golden-Hand”, “Peredur and the Empress”, “Peredur, the Witches and the Castle of Marvels”). All of these appear as complete narrations in themselves, not merely episodes placed together as material for a new novel.

Another point worth particular examination in narratives which preserve preexisting episodes or stories is their manner of joining the episodes in ways which are especially suited to oral transmission. The professionalism of medieval storytellers required that they be able to continue a narration for an indefinite time. This caused the emergence of mnemonic devices that would allow storytellers to prolong a session, if necessary, without losing sight of the overall coherence of their tale. Similar devices are also found, for instance, in the Mabinogi tale of “How Culwhuc won Olwen”. *Peredur* and *Lanzelet* thus appear on the borderline between oral and written narrative. It is significant, therefore, that the habit of collecting and memorizing a number of tales all having the same protagonist may be attributed to a stage of oral storytelling earlier than the first handing down of cycles by medieval manuscripts. It may even be argued that the creation of the Carolingian and Arthurian cycles as we know

them is the result of a transfer to the context of a written culture of a *forma mentis* originally related to the role of medieval professional storytellers. What is then extremely interesting is to try and define the peculiar characteristics introduced into cyclical narrative by the written “mode”.

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