Identity and Recognition in Medieval Narratives

The Isle of Man is ideal as a setting for discussing five medieval narratives, the subject of an NEH 2006 summer seminar. Located in the midst of the Irish Sea between Liverpool and Dublin and in sight of Galloway, IOM with its rich agricultural land and abundant fishing was invaded and settled by Celts, Scandinavians, and English. There has been such a weave of culture and language among these groups that it is difficult to disentangle the threads. This is best exemplified in the stone memorial cross, a Christian symbol, inscribed in runes, a Scandinavian writing system, commemorating a person with an Irish name. Among the people of Man one meets as a casual visitor, there is pride (though not xenophobia) in being Manx (never English nor even part of the UK), a place and people apart from Irish or English, Scots or Welsh, or Scandinavian. The Manx identity is more than the sum of those parts; it is that mixed heritage that makes IOM the happily situated setting to look for common threads among medieval narratives. One such thread is identity—the ability or inability of characters to know whom they face.

Failure to recognize identity is a force that drives conflict in the Mabinogi, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Njal’s Saga, and The Tain. In the First Branch of the Mabinogi, Pwyll fails to recognize what is before him. He fails to recognize the supernatural quality of the hunt he tries to steal. His greatest failure to recognize what is before him occurs at his supposed wedding feast, when he grants a boon to a newcomer who has not announced his name. Rhiannon had warned Pwyll against this, but he fails to heed her warning. The recipient of the boon turns out to be Gwawl, the rival suitor for Rhiannon. Pwyll, because he hasn’t known the name of his rival, and hasn’t heeded the
advice of his betrothed, sets in motion a series of events that the next generation must resolve. Rhiannon lays out a plan that Pwyll must follow to defeat Gwawl. Having learned the wisdom of attending to Rhiannon’s words, Pwyll follows her plan, which includes disguising his own identity. He appears at Gwawl’s supposed wedding feast to Rhiannon, but because Pwyll’s identity is masked, he is able to succeed in tricking Gwawl into the bag for a game of Badger in the Bag. At this point in the narrative, it would seem the problem is solved: Pwyll, through his disguise, is able to reclaim Rhiannon who has stated her preference for Pwyll. Neither Pwyll nor Gwawl had recognized the identity of the interloper, creating conflict. One conflict seems resolved, but the failure of Pwyll and Gwawl to recognize the identity of his opponent plays itself out in the next generation through more conflict and humiliation.

As the enchanted mist falls on Dyfed, Pryderi, Cigfa, Manawydan, and Rhiannon lose their public identity. They remain unidentified to the world around them as they pursue their crafts. The products of their hands are so far superior to those among whom they live that the four are threatened. Rather than reveal themselves and destroy those who threaten them, Manawydan counsels his companions to move to a new area. Here, not naming, not revealing identity avoids conflict. As the exile continues and Pryderi and Rhiannon are lost, it is only by requiring a name that the cross-generational effects of Pwyll’s mistake can be resolved. Manawydan has reached the end of his patience; he captures a mouse that has been ravaging his crops and requires an identity: “I will know who the mouse is” (Mab 52). Llwyd, who had cast the enchantment, reveals the plot he’d undertaken; the enchantment is lifted, names given, identities restored, conflict resolved.
As in the First Branch of the *Mabinogi*, so too in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a social setting is disrupted by the entrance of an unnamed uninvited guest. The Green Knight’s entrance is met with wonder and consternation among Arthur’s court. He is richly attired and richly described. In laying down the challenge, the Green Knight insults Arthur and his court, but he refuses to identify himself. Although Gawain agrees to play the game, he first demands “Now I know thee not, knight, thy court nor thy name/But teach me truly thereto, and tell me how thou art called” (l. 400-401). The Green Knight refuses to identify himself or his context; he tells Gawain to ask for “the knight of the green chapel” (l. 454). When Gawain sets forth 11 months later, he has no idea where he’s going or whom he seeks. Even when he gets to his destination, he remains unaware. The castle appears to Gawain in response to his prayers to Mary, and Gawain is welcomed to this court that has suddenly appeared. Gawain is recognized and known by name and reputation at this mysterious court, but he doesn’t learn the name of the lord of the castle until after the final blow. Gawain accepts the hospitality of the castle’s lord, but he never troubles himself to learn the name of his host nor the place he is staying. Nor does Gawain trouble himself to learn the identity of the woman who has been flinging herself at him since his first morning at the castle. This could be nothing more than a social misstep, but Gawain is the most mannerly of the knights.

Both Pwyll, King of Dyfed, and Gawain, most worthy of Arthur’s knights, appear to behave in the most boorish manner in unfamiliar social settings. Despite their social status, they are buffoons. The humor and absurdity of their predicaments derive from their inability to recognize the identities of their opponents. Over-optimism, insufficient pessimism, and lack of realism are sources of amusement in heroic literature, according

* my translation
to Tom Shippey (40). Pwyll is nothing if not overly optimistic when he grants the boon
to his romantic rival, and Gawain’s episode in Bertilak’s castle lacks certain qualities of
realism. That Pwyll and Gawain are clearly mortal in the face of magical and
supernatural forces does not lessen the absurdity of their situations.

Bertilak claims to have allowed himself to be enchanted, masking his name and
his identity so that Morgan might avenge herself on Guinevere. Enchantment and
vengeance also mask the identity of Llwyd: “to avenge Gwawl son of Clud, through
friendship for him, did I cast enchantment; and on Pryderi did I avenge the playing of
Badger in the Bag on Gwawl son of Clud, when Pwyll Head of Annwn wrought that”
(Mab 53). It is the threat to Llwyd’s wife at the hands of Manawydon and Manawydon’s
negotiation for the release of Pryderi and Rhiannon that lifts the enchantment.

Pwyll and Bertilak take on disguises, masking their identities, fostering conflict,
inflicting humiliation at the behest of women to achieve goals set by women. Carolyn
Anderson suggests that gender and, by extension, power are “not essentialized”; “gender
is unstable as a functional category of culture, because identity is also unstable” (3). In
these narratives, female characters force the action; their agency fosters the conflict.
Their power resides in their ability to compel male characters to pursue the conflict
through disguise to achieve the women’s goals. Violence may be a male prerogative but
the female characters pull the strings. Like Pwyll, Gunnar Hamundarson disguises
himself to deceive an opponent at the behest of a woman.

When Gunnar is introduced into Njal’s Saga, he is described as the picture of
manly perfection: strong, handsome, faithful in friendship, honest in his dealings.
However, the first episode in which we see him act, he disguises himself to deceive an
opponent. When his kinswoman, Unn, approaches him to ask that he recover her dowry from her ex-husband, Gunnar is at first doubtful that he can do it, but he’s willing to try.

“[A]sking favors and granting favors on the ground of kinship and affinity was not small change; it was what made the Icelandic social world go round” (Miller qtd. in Anderson). Gunnar consults his neighbor and great friend, Njal, how best to proceed. Njal counsels Gunnar to disguise himself: “cover yourself with a raincoat and hood and underneath wear a brown-striped woolen cloak. . . .[P]ull your hat down well over your eyes” (Njal 56). It is not enough that Gunnar disguise his appearance and mask his name; he must also disguise his innate character and appear as a mean-spirited, brutal, unreliable peddler: “the rumor will be spread about that Huckster-Hedin [Gunnar’s pseudonym] is the worst possible man to deal with, and that he is as bad as his reputation” (57). Gunnar follows Njal’s advice, disguising his full identity so that he can deceive Hrut into revealing the means by which Unn’s dowry can be reclaimed.

Hrut is amused by this angry disheveled peddler, and he’s unable to recognize the true identity of the visitor, taking this ill-mannered creature just as he presents himself. Hrut’s half-brother, Hoskuld, does, however, recognize from afar Gunnar’s identity. Hoskuld has a dream of a bear entering Hrut’s house: “This bear was the fylgja of none other than Gunnar of Hlidarendi. I believe I see it all—now that it is too late” (60). Hoskuld has recognized Gunnar’s fetch—his spirit. The inability to recognize his opponent is costly, though not life-threatening, for Hrut. Gunnar succeeds through disguise, deception, and threat, but ultimately reveals himself and his purpose.

Hrut learns too late about his brother’s vision and faces humiliation, but finally accepts the lesson. Pwyll withstands not only the humiliation meted out by Gwawl, but
the chiding he receives from Rhiannon. Gawain takes on tasks of great difficulty against an opponent who is, initially at least, unnamed. This lack of a public identity leads to the conflict and the test, the outcome of which clarifies the identities—the humanness—of Pwyll and Gawain and Hrut.

These tales are meant to entertain; they are not coarse or rude (in either sense of the word), but they do contain humor, and the humor can be seen in the use of this comic trope—not seeing what is immediately there to be seen. Pwyll is persistently, almost obstinately, blind to what is before him. Gawain fails to recognize his opponent and his host. Hrut fails to see through the ruse that will cost him dearly. The audience is invited to laugh at the hero’s (or victim’s) inability to recognize what is before him.

There is a touch of clownishness, though unwitting on the part of the duped character. Humor is difficult to universalize and quantify. What amuses us is temporally and culturally specific. We can usually, given a context, recognize irony, but in tales transmitted from a hundred or five hundred or a thousand years ago, we may fail to get the joke. Consider the glosses in Shakespeare’s plays explaining the puns for a modern audience. Or consider the frequency with which “A Modest Proposal” appears on the challenged texts lists in American schools.

This comic trope is exaggerated and becomes grotesque in one of the remscela, precursors to the Tain Bo Cuailgne. Cuchulainn sets in motion the destruction of his own son at the boy’s conception. Aife announces that she will bear a boy and she will send the boy to Cuchulainn in Ireland seven years hence. Aife requires of Cuchulainn a name for the boy. This naming leads to the boy’s death at his father’s hand:
Cuchulainn left him a gold thumb-ring and told her [Aife] the boy was to come to Ireland to find him when his finger had grown to fit the ring. The name he gave him was Connla. He said Connla was to reveal his name to no man, that he must make way for no man, and refuse no man combat. (Tain 33)

The boy, Connla, arriving in Ireland follows the instructions, insulting the men of Ireland in the process. Cuchulainn’s wife Emer has recognized the boy for who he is, but is unable to hold her husband back. “‘No matter who he is, wife,’ Cuchulainn said, ‘I must kill him for the honour of Ulster’” (Tain 44). Cuchulainn, despite his wife’s warning, challenges the wondrous child: “‘Maybe you were meant to meet me,’ Cuchulainn said. ‘Name yourself or die’” (Tain 44). The boy refuses to name himself; he battles his father to a draw, and Cuchulainn destroys the boy with his secret weapon—the *gae bolga* (a weapon Cuchulainn uses against any who are otherwise his equal in battle). After defeating Connla, Cuchulainn acknowledges his son to the men of Ulster. There are certainly Freudian overtones in the destruction of the son by the father, but the grotesque attracts attention and invites an amused response from the audience. Even if it has come to be culturally unacceptable, hurting people and people being hurt are funny (Shippey). The grotesque, the absurd, the humiliating invite laughter.

For an audience whose lands experienced months of long nights and days shrouded in mist and cloud, whose darkness was dispelled only by firelight, recognizing the other could be a matter of survival. Not knowing who is there in the mist and the dark is a source of fear. What better way to dispel fear than to laugh at others who have been duped by their inability to recognize what is there to be seen. When the mists lift,
conflicts resolve for good or ill in the revelation and assertion of an identity, a name and the contexts attached to that name.
Works cited

Anderson, Carolyn. “No fixed point: gender and blood feuds in Njal’s Saga.”


