Discussion Topics for Week 1

“How Culhwch Won Olwen” from *The Mabinogion*

During discussion section, the class will break into small groups to prepare class reports on the following topics. Before coming to class, type in your answers to each set of questions and print the file, so that you will be ready to work with your assigned group when you get to class. Be sure to include evidence (with page numbers) from the reading that could be used to support your answers. You may take additional notes during class; but you will turn in your print-outs at the end of discussion section for grading.

1) Celtic vs. Christian traditions in “How Culhwch Won Olwen”

a. Which aspects of the tale suggest that the main characters follow Christian traditions?

They baptize Culhwch in the very first paragraph. Pg 1 “the boy was baptized with the name Culhwch”

b. Which aspects of the tale link it to pre-Christian Celtic beliefs or traditions?

They murder a king simply to steal his wife which is not a Christian thing to do. Pg 1 “They killed the king and brought his wife home”

c. What does this combination suggest about the culture of the author of the Welsh tale and its audience?

It is around the time of very early Christians so not all the beliefs are set in stone and the audience is not completely Christians. I think this because they’re curses in the story which was never a popular thing in Christian lore. Pg 2 “I swear a destiny on you that you may not rub your side against a wife until you win Olwen daughter of Ysbaddaden.”

d. How does this tale’s depiction of superhuman feats and magical curses compare with today’s tales of action heroes? The feats aren’t always possible until the action is needed to progress, like when Menw turns into a bird it was not known that he could do that before. This is something that happens many times over in the today’s stories. Pg 26 “And Menw took the form of a bird.”

2) The Catalogue (List) of Arthur’s Followers
a. How does Culhwch’s long list of the members of King Arthur’s court help to depict Arthur as a great king? It shows that many people admire and respect Arthur as the person he is and it lists incredible abilities or back stories that some of the members have to show an extent of authority. Pg 5 “these men came forth from hell.”

b. What other purposes might there be for including this list in this tale?

To show that Arthur has many relations with Kings, Princes, Queens, and people in positions of power. Pg 5 “Taliesin the chief of the bards,”

c. What kinds of information does the audience receive from the list, in addition to the names of specific people?

They receive titles, interesting facts, and back stories that make certain characters seem much more interesting. Pg 5 “he never yet made a request at the hand of any lord”

d. How does this list compare with two other lists that appear in the tale?

This list does not use a lot of repetition unlike the other two which repeat many sentences and sayings. This is because it is composed of many names and not everyone has the same name. Pg 5 “Nerth the son of Kedarn, and Drudwas the son of Tryffin, and Twrch the son of Perif”

3) King Arthur as Man of War and Peace

a. How does the tale indicate that Arthur is a strong military leader?

Arthur has many warriors at his disposal, leads his armies, and is a renowned fighter. These are all things that a military leader would need. Pg 26 “Arthur summoned unto him all the warrior who were in the three Islands of Britain.”

b. How does King Arthur resolve the stand-off between his gatekeeper and Culhwch peacefully?

He tells the gatekeeper to go greet the man graciously with the upmost respect, as what Arthur hears about Culhwch makes him sound like an incredible person. Pg 2 “If you came in walking, go out running.”

c. How does Arthur’s hunt for Twrch Trwyth take on the qualities of a war between kings or armies?

The battle moves to many different places which relates to conquering a kingdom, because many places have to be taken over in a war. The boar loses many underlings and so does Arthur. Pg 28 “Trwyth went onto Llwch Ewin, and Arthur overtook him there”
d. What does the willingness of other animals to help Arthur add to the tale’s depiction of Arthur as a successful king?

The animals see Arthur as a respectable, friendly, and courageous figure so they in turn help him just from knowing about his trials and heroism. Pg 22 “Nevertheless, since you are an embassy from Arthur,"

4) Culhwch and Olwen as Hero and Heroine

a. What details link Culhwch to the Celtic fertility myth?

Culhwch is covered in items of prosperity from head to toe such as gold and silver which shows him as a wealthy and powerful individual which is parallel to how the Celtic Sun God should be. Pg 2 “Worth three hundred cattle was the great quantity of gold”

b. What details link Olwen to the Celtic fertility myth?

Olwen’s hair is golden in representation to the sun god and everything about her represents being fertile. Pg 12 “Her bosom was whiter than the breast of the white swan.”

c. How does Culhwch’s quest to win Olwen compare to the accounts of how other husbands win or value wives in this tale?

Other husbands in the tales must complete task to win their wives too but the difference with Culhwch’s quest is that he has many more things to complete. His father wins his new wife simply by killing a king. Pg 1 “They killed the king and brought his wife home”

d. How does Culhwch’s success in winning Olwen become a victory for Arthur’s kingship as well?

Culhwch’s success in winning Olwen is a victory for Arthur’s kingship as well because he and his court are the ones who gain all the credit for completing the tedious task. Arthur will only become more respected for what he has done. Pg 29 “but Arthur who accomplished this for you. By my free will you should never have won her”