

From Storytelling to Sermons: The Oral Narrative Tradition of Wales

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As someone whose main interest is storytelling in medieval Wales, orality, aurality, and performance are key issues in any analysis of the Middle Welsh prose corpus, especially in matters relating to style and structure. The tales reflect their sources in *cyfarwyddyd* (traditional lore), and as such give us an insight into the oral performances of the medieval Welsh *cyfarwydd* (storyteller). Ideas regarding the conventions of an oral performance can be explored by analyzing the narratives of twentieth-century storytellers collected by the Museum of Welsh Life, an area that needs further detailed study. Recently, there have been attempts to suggest the chronology of manuscript versions of certain medieval prose texts by recourse to their “oral” features, and theories proposed regarding the changes that occur as an oral tale establishes itself in the new literary medium. However, more research needs to be undertaken before we can use features such as tagging conventions, conjunctive cohesion, and structure of formulae as benchmarks. A University of Wales project is currently involved in transcribing the earliest of our medieval Welsh prose texts up to the middle of the fourteenth century; by May 2004, two CD-ROMs will have been published bringing the contents of about 44 manuscripts into the public domain, a total of some 2,000,000 words. This will be an invaluable tool for the study of not only the linguistic but also the stylistic features (including formulaic content) of our medieval prose texts.

There has always been a tendency to see the Middle Ages as the Golden Age of Welsh storytelling. Certainly, from the sixteenth century onwards there is a clear impression of an oral narrative tradition in decline. However, from the mid-eighteenth century an extremely rich oral culture came to the fore in the context of nonconformist religion, and evidenced not only by the sermon but also by extemporaneous prayer. This is an area of research that is beginning to be explored, drawing in part on the

methodologies of Bruce Rosenberg's *Can These Bones Live? The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (1988) and Robert H. Ellison's *The Victorian Pulpit: Spoken and Written Sermons in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1998). A project is under way at Cardiff University, analyzing the primary sources for evidence of orality/literacy/performance features in the dramatic sermons of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the biographies of individual preachers, personal recollections, religious artifacts and ephemera, and architectural features of the chapels themselves. As well as being important *per se*, it is hoped that a study of Welsh preaching will also illuminate the storytelling culture of medieval Wales—the demands of orality, aurality, and performance have left their mark on the dramatic sermons and the medieval tales alike.

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Celtic dialects kept up in Wales, Cornwall, the Highland of Scotland, and in Ireland, where they are still spoken by many people. Today English vocabulary is approximately half Germanic (from the Saxons and Vikings) and half Romance (from French and Latin). There are however considerable borrowings from other languages. Scotland and England had quite separate monarchies until 1603. A full merger between the two countries into the Kingdom of Great Britain followed in 1707. Meanwhile Ireland was not united to Great Britain until 1801. In 1922 southern Ireland withdrew from the union and became a free state, the Irish Republic. Since then, the United Kingdom has stayed complete and continued to absorb newcomers from all over the world. From Storytelling to Sermons: The Oral Narrative Tradition of Wales. January 2004 · Oral Tradition. Sioned Davies. Oral Tradition 18.2 (2003) 189-191 As someone whose main interest is storytelling in medieval Wales, orality, aurality, and performance are key issues in any analysis of the Middle Welsh prose corpus, especially in matters relating to style and structure. The tales reflect their sources in cyfarwyddyd (traditional lore), and as such give us an insight into the oral performances of the medieval [Show full abstract] Welsh cyfarwydd (storyteller). Ideas regarding the conventions of an oral performance can be explored by analyzing the narratives of twentieth-century storytellers collected by the Museum of Welsh Life, an area that needs further detailed study. Traditional Storytelling. Myth, Hero Tales, and Folktales. Storytelling is the flagship of Irish folklore. Our famous oral tradition is exemplified in famous storytellers from Peig Sayers to Anna Nic an Luain, Eamon a Burc, and many more. Notably, the members of the travelling community were traditionally regarded as amongst the best storytellers, and they have made an enormous contribution to the preservation of Ireland's oral and musical tradition. Anthropologists George and Sharon Gmelch famously recorded many of these narratives during the 1970s. Stories of Fionn and the Fianna (The Fenian Cycle) CuChulainn and the Red Branch Knights (The Ulster Cycle), The Cycle of the Kings, and the Mythological Cycle, comprise the four major saga cycles in Early Irish literature. The oral tradition got a temporary boost from telephony. With it, stories could be exchanged farther, wider, faster, and once again completely ephemerally. Until recently, that is. Now, more often than not, phone conversations mostly involve curt epigrams streaming soundlessly from the ether, ungrammatically deprecating human speech with staccato abbreviations, misspellings, chockablock with annoying caricatures. Constantly the world hums with ephemeral narratives, billions and billions each day, much of them spam. As in Neolithic times, such stories are invisible, merely masquerading as printed matter. If we hew to oral tradition, we can dictate stories. Our device will listen intently and decode our speech directly into digital prose.