MULTI-ETHNICITY OF LITERARY CULTURE
IN COURTLY CIRCLES OF 12th CENTURY ENGLAND

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Twelfth century Britain became the arena of numerous cultural and political changes. It was a period of revived interest in Latin and Greek literature, philosophy and science, the renewed interest in learning and in diverse intellectual pursuits, fresh approach towards historiography and, finally, the new fascination with vernacular traditions. Haskins characterizes “the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century” as “an age of fresh and vigorous life” [Haskins 1924: viii]. Similarly, Benson and Constable emphasize intellectual energy and enhanced creativity of the period, especially “its tireless quest for new knowledge, and its insistence on restructuring knowledge new and old alike; its astonishing creativity in the arts and literature; its profoundly innovative spirituality, balanced in part by its occasional secularity, sometimes earnest and sometimes laughing; its sense of renewal, reform, rebirth” [Benson, Constable 1982: xxx].

Politically, the period is to be associated with the Angevin dynasty and the court of Henry II Plantagenet, his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine and subsequently their children, Richard I and John the Lackland. Historical perspective would not be complete, though, without reaching back to the rule of Henry I Beauclerc and the following years of the civil war between the forces of king Stephen and Empress Matilda. However, it was the circle of Henry II which is said to have been “the most glittering court of the day,” attracting not only scholars and specialists in jurisprudence, but also other “men of letters”: philosophers, poets and troubadours [Echard 2005: 2]. Most of them were university educated courtier–clerics, authors of historical writing, satire, anecdotes, travelogues and poetry [Clanchy 1993: 46, 203-204, 229-230]. It seems that courtly culture in Britain was thriving, showing all signs of innovation and creativity, characteristic for the twelfth century renaissance. Referring to Geof-
frey of Monmouth’s inventive description of the court of King Arthur, it could be stated that:

By this time Britain had reached such a standard of sophistication that it excelled all other kingdoms in its general affluence, the richness of its decorations, and the courteous behaviour of its inhabitants [Geoffrey of Monmouth 1966: 229].

Even without Geoffrey’s purposeful exaggeration, one can safely assume that courtly environment of the time fostered literary productivity, being a magnet for distinguished writers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Those authors managed to encompass in their writings at least two separate literary traditions: on the one hand, Latin literary culture, on the other, oral vernacular folklore. Thus, the aim of this paper is to emphasize multi-ethnicity of literary production at the Anglo-Norman-Celtic court of early Plantagenets and to show how unwritten, local, vernacular myths and legends were gradually transmitted into polished, written Latin texts.

Multi-ethnicity of courtly society was the result of the vast geographical scope of the Angevin Empire, which stretched, in John of Salisbury’s words, from the borders of Britain to those of Spain [John of Salisbury 1909: 49]. Henry II combined the throne of England with French dominions of his father, Geoffrey of Anjou, and possessions of his powerful wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, in the south of France. England was at the peak of its European power and its territories were inhabited by people of diverse national affiliations. This fact found its literary expression in one of Arthurian romances by the master of the genre, Chrétien de Troyes. Erec and Enide finishes with the coronation scene which takes place at Nantes on Christmas Day. King Arthur, accompanied by the archbishop of Canterbury, summoned his greatest nobles from all parts of his realm:

From many a different country there were counts and dukes and kings, Normans, Bretons, Scotch, and Irish; from England and Cornwall there was a very rich gathering of nobles; for from Wales to Anjou, in Maine and in Poitou, there was no knight of importance, nor lady of quality, but the best and the most elegant were at the court at Nantes, as the King had bidden them [Chrétien de Troyes 2006: 74].

Chrétien de Troyes, who had links with the Angevin court, and might have even sought patronage from Henry II, describes in detail the splendid feast which follows. National groups, which he mentions, correspond to the subject dominions of the Angevin Empire. What is more, the silver coins which Arthur generously distributes to his guests during the ceremony, resemble the coins of Henry II, and two leopards, engraved at the feet of the thrones, seem to be the Angevin’s heraldic emblem [Aurell 2007: 378].

Both passages describing the royal court, the one by Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the other by Chrétien de Troyes, convey the notions of prosperity, abundance, dis-

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play, generosity, and harmony. The court appears to be the unifying force, bringing together and consolidating disparate ethnic groups; and consequently, raising them to the higher level of cultural sophistication. It seems, however, that such a perspective is superficial, limited to the overt, explicit message propagated by the court propaganda. The underside of this ethnically mixed-up culture, witnessing various tensions, internal conflicts, and overwhelming anxiety, is disregarded.

It should be pointed out, though, that the implicit, latent sense of uncertainty, fear and instability, resulting in an almost apocalyptic tone, can be detected in numerous works produced in courtly circles. William of Malmesbury, for example, who tended to incorporate various anecdotes into his history, reported a strange tale about a woman with two bodies. The story, taken from local folklore, is set somewhere on the border between Brittany and Normandy. There lived a woman who had “two heads, four arms, and every other part two-fold to the navel; beneath were two legs, two feet, and all other parts single” [William of Malmesbury 1847: 235]. Two heads and mouths acted independently of each other, so that when one of them laughed or talked, the other one could cry or remain silent. Eventually one of the women died, but the other continued to live for the next three years, carrying the “decomposing corpse” of her dead sister. The unnerving message of the anecdote is explained by William in allegorical terms. Two women stand for England and Normandy, which are separate countries, yet united under one rule. England is the prosperous sister, which continues to flourish and manages to support the barren and sterile Normandy, until it perishes one day under its burden. William’s story conveys a sense of disaster and imminent tragedy. At the core of Anglo-Norman culture, there is a germ of disintegration and decay. The story turns out to be even more disturbing when we take under account mixed, Anglo-Norman parentage of William of Malmesbury, whose father was a Norman, and mother English [Rigg 1992: 34]. His disconcerting image of a deformed female body as a symbol of warped Anglo-Norman union seems to undermine the reassuring remarks of Richard FitzNeale, the cleric-courtier in the service of Henry II, who believed that intermarriage in England had rendered the Normans indistinguishable from the English: “the nations are so mixed that it can scarcely be decided... who is of English birth and who of Norman” [Richard FitzNeale 1950: 53]. In fact, the subversive nature of this blend of national identities cannot be disregarded.

The idea is also expressed by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his seemingly conventional geographic introduction to *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Geoffrey seems to be following the pattern, embedded in traditional British historiography, of beginning a historical narrative with a short topographic description and praise of Britain. He follows in the footsteps of Gildas, Bede, Nennius, or even his contemporary, Henry of Huntingdon. Similarly to his predecessors, he emphasizes the beauty of the land and refers to the conventional use of numbers, mentioning three major rivers, five nationalities and twenty-eight cities. There are several differences, however. While Bede and Gildas offer a synchronic, stable picture, Geoffrey emphasizes his-

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3 ‘set iam cohabitantibus Anglicis et Normannis et alterutrum uxoribus ducentibus uel nubentibus, sic permixte sunt nationes ut uix decerni possit hodie, de liberis loquor, quis Anglicus quis Normannus sit genere’.
historical change and instability. Moreover, as opposed to Bede, who focuses on harmony of diverse ethnic groups which are unified by Latin, a language common to all, Geoffrey mentions “five nations” in the context of violence and conflict:

Britain is inhabited by five races of people, the Norman-French, the Britons, the Saxons, the Picts and the Scots. Of these the Britons once occupied the land from sea to sea, before the others came. Then the vengeance of God overtook them because of their arrogance and they submitted to the Picts and the Saxons [Geoffrey of Monmouth 1966: 54].

The image of conflict, hostility and historical change is best illustrated by the position of the Britons, who were both, conquerors and the conquered. Under the leadership of Brutus, the expatriate Trojans take possession of the island, settle down and cultivate the land. Later, however, they are subjugated by the valiant Anglo-Saxon tribes. Geoffrey rehabilitates the Celtic past by linking it with the Homeric Troy. What is more, he seems to be equating the Britons in the Historia with the Welsh of his own day. In his opinion, the British degenerated and changed their name into Welsh (Gualenses). Geoffrey is provocative in two ways: he provides the Britons with the glorious history, outstripping that of both, the English and the Normans, and he signals that the co-existence of five ethnic groups is far from peaceful.

The greatest significance of Geoffrey, however, lies in the fact, that he managed to transfer elements of oral Celtic traditions into to the mainstream of Latinized courtly culture. He was most successful in popularizing the tales of King Arthur, which in the 12th and 13th centuries provided for the development of the whole body of Arthurian literature (in the form of verse romance and lays) [Schmolke-Hasselmann 1998: 235, 290-291]. Despite the fact that the account of pre-Saxon Britain is mostly fictitious, based to a considerable extent, on Bardic oral tradition and Geoffrey’s imagination, it was accepted by most medieval historians. What is more, Merlin’s prophecies, which constitute a separate part of the Historia, influenced much of political thinking of the House of Plantagenet. It seems that Arthurian legends which had their source in Welsh folklore, found their way into high culture due to a simple literary trick used by Geoffrey of Monmouth: in the prologue to The History of the Kings of Britain he claims to be translating “a certain very ancient book written in the British language,” [Geoffrey of Monmouth 1966: 51] brought to him ex Britan-

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5 In the prologue to the Historia Geoffrey of Monmouth points out that the reports of Gildas and Bede on British history did not include pre-Christian kings or Arthur. Geoffrey filled in that gap with the history of Britain from the fall of Troy to the death of Cadwaladr in AD 689. Britons are descendants of Romans who took their name from Brutus.

nia by his friend Walter, archdeacon of Oxford. What is more, Geoffrey appears to be a self-conscious author, reserving the rights to British prehistory only to himself. He orders William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon “to say nothing at all about the kings of the Britons” as they lack the “old book,” which Geoffrey claims to have translated into Latin. The mysterious “ancient book,” which had probably never existed, paved the way for Welsh national myths into the official written culture.

The Historia used to draw courtly readers’ attention to the Celtic fringes of Britain, especially the “Welsh Marches,” which were traditionally hostile towards the English or Norman rule. Those regions rejected Henry II’s territorial claims and fostered the belief that Arthur, once victorious over the Anglo-Saxons, would one day return from the Otherworld to support the Celtic peoples in their struggle with the Normans. Thus, Geoffrey’s text evoked issues connected with uncertainty of life on the border, such as instability, conflict and potential change.

The very figure of Geoffrey of Monmouth bears several similarities to two cleric-courtiers attached to the Angevin court: Walter Map and Gerald of Wales [Clanchy 1983: 177-178]. All of them were Welsh-Norman by descent, that is of mixed, Welsh and Anglo-Norman parentage, they lived in the Welsh Marches and obtained university education. Geoffrey was an archdeacon in the diocese of Llandaff and finally, by the end of his life, a bishop of St Asaph in Wales [Curley 1994: 1-6]. Both, his name, Geoffrey Arthur, or Galfridus Arturus, and surname Monmoutensis (Of Monmouth) point to his strong Welsh connections. Similarly, the name of Walter Map proves his Welsh affiliations, as the word “Map” is a nickname for a Welshman, and Walter identifies himself as “marchio sum Walensibus” [Rigg 1992: 88], that is a Marcher, someone who lives in the border region. In fact, he spent most of his life in Herefordshire, close to the Welsh border. Finally, Gerald of Wales, born in Manorbier in Pembrokeshire, was a son of a Norman marcher baron who settled down in the south of Wales, while on his mother’s side he was related to the Welsh royal family [Thompson 1954: 263]. Both, Walter Map and Gerald of Wales held administrative positions in the Angevin royal court, and produced innovative, self-conscious literary texts in which they exploited collective memory of the Celts. Their position of courtier-clerics facilitated the transmission of oral Celtic folklore to the learned, polished Latin narratives.

Walter Map and Gerald of Wales literally lived on the edge of Welsh and Anglo-Norman cultures, but they also experienced the borderline condition of being both clerics, that is ecclesiastics, and curiales, that is state administrators in royal service. They had to put up with various hardships connected with their ambiguous half-way position between clerical and secular status. That uncertain, hybrid status resulted in their ironic stance and intellectual detachment, expressed explicitly in their texts. Finally, also the literary works which they produced, could be called borderline literature: a collage of anecdotes, stories of the supernatural, taken from Welsh folklore and passages on history. However, the self aware nature of those texts, especially the playfulness of language, and predilection for parody and satire were not only the result of the borderline condition of courtier-clerics, but also the characteristics of medieval court speech, requiring the qualities of urbanitas and decorum, in which jesting (jocus) and wit (facetia) were highly prized [Jaeger 1991: 161-168].
Both, the lives and works of Walter Map and Gerald of Wales were the expression of multi-national character of the Angevin court with all its complexities, and ambiguity. In the collection of anecdotes, *On Courtier’s Trifles*, Walter Map uses a graphic image of Hell which seems to illustrate the dangerous and threatening aspect of that multi-ethnicity:

Hell, it is said, is a penal place, and if I may presume so far, in an access of boldness, I would rashly say that the court is, not hell, but a place of punishment. Yet I doubt whether I have defined it rightly: a place it does seem to be, but it is not therefore hell. Nay, it is certain that whatever contains a thing or things in itself, is a place. Grant, then, that it is a place: let us see whether it be a penal one [Walter Map 2002: 8-9].

Map compares court to infernal regions, but his description is filled with the pervasive sense of insecurity and doubt. Examining the proposition that court is hell appears to be an impossible task. The only certain characteristics of court-Hell is its changeability and constant fluctuation, as it is “stable only in its instability” [Walter Map 2002: 12]. The court is chaotic and the courtiers squander their energies in hectic, multifarious pursuits. Map expresses his confusion traversing the words of Augustine:

in the court I exist and of the court I speak, and what the court is, God knows, I know not [...] It is changeable and various, space-bound and wandering, never continuing in one state. When I leave it, I know it perfectly: when I come back to it [...] I am become a stranger to it, and it to me. The court is the same, its members are changed. I shall perhaps be within the bounds of truth if I describe it in the terms which Porphyry uses to define a genus, and call it a number of objects bearing a certain relation to one principle. We courtiers are assuredly a number, and an infinite one, and all striving to please one individual. But to-day we are one number, to-morrow we shall be a different one: yet the court is not changed; it remains always the same [Walter Map 2002: 2-3].

The only stable point in this otherwise shapeless world is the king, whom all the courtiers try to satisfy. He appears to be a unifying force, attempting to impose structure on the amorphous space. Courtiers, however, feel trapped and isolated and experience constant anxiety. Thus, Map’s metaphor may refer to complex realities of the Plantagenet court, which attracted people of mixed, Anglo-Norman or Anglo-Normano-Welsh descent. The apparent ambiguity of their situation might be compared to infernal tortures, or more mildly, to the state of imprisonment in court, or in Hell. Multi-ethnicity produces chaos, and in this sense may be disruptive.

Despite the initial confusion and uneasiness, Map embraces his ethnic background and turns to Celtic oral traditions. In fact, the second distinction of *De nugis curialium* is comprised almost exclusively of various tales and anecdotes taken from Welsh folklore. The stories are loosely related, but most of them are fantastic narratives exploring local legends about supernatural apparitions, fairy brides, ghosts and vampires. Walter Map explains his technique in a series of stories about Welsh thieves. He refers to a Welsh custom which requires young men to prove their wit and prowess by leaving their homes and stealing something on a New Year’s Day; preferably stories or information. And so they go out “to raid, to steal, or at least to
listen” [Walter Map 2002: 188-9], the last option being most attractive for the protagonist of the tale. In the conversation with Thomas Becket, Walter Map calls himself a “hunter of stories,” which could be understood as a “thief of stories.” In fact, he repeatedly emphasizes that his tales come from oral sources, which requires on his part the ability “to listen.” Audicio makes him similar to the young Welsh thief from his anecdote.

The contrast between written and unwritten sources seems to be of considerable interest for Walter Map, as he draws a distinction between “stories” and “sayings” [Rigg 1992: 91]. He openly challenges the reader:

I set before you here a whole forest and timberyard, I will not say of stories, but of sayings [...]. I am but your huntsman. I bring you the game, it is for you to make dainty dishes out of it [Walter Map 2002: 208-209].

It is clear that Map’s sympathies lie on the part of the unwritten, oral traditions which he uses freely to his own advantage. His preoccupation with the spoken word was recorded by Gerald of Wales, who quotes Map’s words:

You have written many things, master Gerald, and still do; I have spoken much. You produced writings, I produced words [Gerald of Wales 1867: 410-411].

When Map, the “hunter of tales,” juxtaposes scripta to verba it is obvious that he values “sayings” more: both, as a source of inspiration, and as a form of literary expression. In effect, Welsh folklore gradually penetrated into the work of one of most innovative writers attached to the Angevin court.

Therefore, it must be pointed out that De nugis curialium contains two earliest variations of the typically Welsh folktale of the otherworld fairy bride [Wood 1992: 57]. The tale belongs to the supernatural legend tradition in which the otherworld bride, or the Lake Lady, marries a mortal, but finally, insulted by the violation of some taboo, returns to her world, leaving her husband and children. The first tale is located in Llyn Syfaddon (Llangorse Lake) in South Wales and focuses on the figure of Brychan Brycheiniog, a legendary Welsh hero and founder of the area (Breconshire); the other is set in Ledbury North near Walter Map’s home Hereford and describes a fantastic adventure of Eadric the Wild, an Anglo-Saxon heroic figure who opposed the Norman invaders. Both anecdotes occur in the second distinction of the book, along with other Welsh traditions.

In the story entitled Of Illusory Apparitions, Brychan, whom Map calls Gwestin Gwestiniog at this point, for three nights sees a group of fairy women dancing gracefully in the moonlight. He follows them in his oat field until they plunge into the water of a nearby lake. When they are already beneath the water, he overhears them murmuring a secret how they may be caught. On the fourth night, Gwestin manages to catch one of the fairies and forces her to marry him. The very structure of the narrative here seems to indicate that the original version of the legend Map was using

7 ‘Multa, magister Giralde scripsistis, et multum adhuc scribitis, et nos multa diximus. Vos scripta dedistis, et nos verba.’
had more information than he is giving, especially that the folk motif of the mortal overpowering the fairy was popular. In Map’s variant, the fairy agrees to stay with Gwestin and be his devoted wife until he shouts at her beyond the nearby river and strikes her with his bridle. After many long years of a happy marriage this actually happens. As a result, she immediately flees into the water with their children, and Gwestin manages to stop only his youngest son, Triunein Vagelauc. The boy’s name indicates that he was physically handicapped, ‘bent, stooping’ or possibly ‘having a crutch’ [Walter Map 2002: 150 (note 1)], which may be the reason why he was so easily caught. The ambitious young man leaves his father, though, and seeks career at the court of the king of South Wales. He soon, however, falls out of favour by boasting that king Brychan is superior to his new overlord, king of Deheubarth. The enraged king of South Wales casts him into prison and then requires him to lead a military expedition against king Brychan. At the end of the story, Triunein disappears, but Map suggests that he did not die, but returned to the lake to his fairy mother.

The tale raises several interesting questions. It is not certain whether Walter Map realized that Gwestin Gwestiniog and Brychan Brycheiniog were the same person. The fact that he calls him Gwestin when he gets his fairy bride and Brychan when he is the king, may suggest that the first part of the tale had an oral source and the second was closer to written sources. It could also explain another inconsistency in the story, namely that Brychan is first, the boy’s father, and then his king and finally enemy. It seems that Walter Map’s sources are extensive and that he might have had access to a wider heroic cycle connected with Brychan Brycheiniog. Finally, another interesting issue is the fact that the anecdote plays the role of a family origin legend.

In the second tale, attached to the figure of Eadric the Wild, there is no lake, typical for Welsh fairy folktales; the hero captures the bride at night in the forest. The fairy tells Eadric she will stay with him until he reproaches her with her origins. The woman’s striking beauty is considered proof of her supernatural origins, and William the Conqueror is said to have visited Eadric to admire the wife. One day, however, the taboo is violated, and the hero dies broken-hearted after his wife vanishes, leaving an heir, Alonth. Map’s concluding remarks are worth noting:

We have heard of demons that are incubi and succubi and of the dangers of union with them; rarely do we read [...] of heirs or offspring who ended their day prosperously [Walter Map 2002: 158-159].

Alonth, however, survives and dies an old and holy man. This anecdote could be also a courtly reference to the family situation of Henry II Plantagenet. Map would most certainly be aware of the fact that Henry II’s origins were associated with the Melusine story [Short 2007: 346]. He includes an example of this story in a different part of De nugis, and he may be making a literary allusion to this here. Moreover, Map highlights an important aspect: such stories often function as origin legends attached to unusual families, as it was the case with Brychan Brycheiniog, Eadric the Wild or Henry II and his successors.

It is interesting to look how the tales may have functioned in a social context. Map’s two anecdotes are set in Wales soon after the Anglo-Norman conquest and
focus on the lives of heroic figures. Walter Map, who lived on the Welsh border, for almost thirty years served Henry II, the king who was greatly concerned with legitimizing his power by creating quasi-mythic history for the House of Plantagenet. In fact, much of De nugis fulfils that purpose by presenting England’s *modernitas*, beginning with the times of William the Conqueror and William Rufus. The Welsh play an important role in this scheme providing a kind of alluring romantic background. What is more, elements of Celtic folklore, including fairy beliefs, provide cultural continuity with the past culture. Indeed, the geographical milieu of the tales indicates the close relationship between the Welsh and the Anglo-Normans, and the richness of culture, which must have existed.

Otherworld fairy bride tale, combined with the Melusine story, is explored by Walter Map in an anecdote linked with the family of Robert, the Marcher Lord of Gloucester. It is another family origin legend, in which the female ancestor of a powerful house is a supernatural creature in a human form of an exceptionally beautiful lady. In this story, however, the woman’s diabolical nature is suggested; she has an aversion to holy water and during mass she leaves the church before consecration. The reasons of the lady’s suspicious behaviour are discovered by her mother-in-law who spies on the young woman and observes in amazement that during her bath she turns into a dragon:

The mother told her son what she had seen. He sent for a priest: they came on the two unawares, and sprinkled them with holy water. With a sudden leap they dashed through the roof, and with loud shrieks left the shelter they had haunted so long [Walter Map 2002: 348-349].

The otherworld wife of Henno (Henno Dentatus, the ancestor of Robert fitz Haimon, father of Robert of Gloucester’s wife Mabel) vanishes into the air, similarly to the fairy bride of Eadric the Wild from the previous story. She belongs, however, rather to the dark, devilish underworld, than to the fantastic realm of fairies from Celtic legends. Walter Map appropriates a popular myth from oral Celtic legends into the clerical literary discourse and turns it into writing at the court of Henry II. He does it by assimilating the supernatural into the historical.

Elements of Welsh folklore can be detected also in the works of Gerald of Wales, another clerical writer associated with the royal Angevin court. *Itinerarium Cambriae*, a description of his journey through Wales in 1188 with archbishop Baldwin, contains a wide range of historical anecdotes and folkloric information about the country. Gerald’s journey through Wales acquires a metaphoric meaning. The Welsh-Norman cleric-courtier travels through his native Wales with the Anglo-Norman archbishop of Canterbury, preaching and raising money for the Third Crusade. The journey image addresses the issues of motion, change and reshuffling of materials. Moreover, it emphasizes the complexities of navigating through the intricacies of Welsh and Anglo-Norman culture.

The work’s loose, episodic structure, its casual, chatty tone and interest in oral Celtic traditions brings it close to Walter Map’s *De nugis curialium*. Gerald of Wales is interested in dreams, miracles and legends about mysterious, supernatural worlds and
their fairy inhabitants. One of the tales included in *Itinerarium Kambriae* (in Book I, Chapter 8), gives an account of protagonist’s travel to an underground realm, which appears to be a fairyland [Goldie 2009: 64; Faletra 2014: 167]. The spatial and temporal setting of the anecdote fit into the pattern of the whole book. The recounted events took place not too long ago (“parum ante haec nostra tempora”) and in this region (“his in partibus”) [Gerald of Wales 1978: 133; 1868: 75]. Gerald tells a story of an old priest, Elidyr (Eliodorus, alive 1148-76), who relates his childhood adventure. When he was twelve years old, he ran away from school and found a hole by a riverbank. After two days of hiding, he is approached by two “pygmy-sized” people who invite him to their subterranean kingdom, promising a land of “playtime and pleasures.” They lead him to the underground world, beautiful, pleasant and fruitful, though a little dark, “because the sun did not shine there.” The people are of exquisite beauty:

> very thin, but beautifully made and well-proportioned. In complexion they were fair, and they wore their hair long and flowing down over their shoulders like women. They had horses of a size which suited them, about as big as greyhounds [Gerald of Wales 1978: 134].

They do not eat meat nor fish, but only “various milk dishes, made up into junkets flavoured with saffron.” They are not Christians, but follow high moral principles: they never lie and have greatest admiration for “plain unvarnished truth.” Elidyr is enchanted not only with the natural beauty of the land, with its “lovely rivers and meadows and delightful woodlands and plains,” but also with the riches of the country, its gold, silver and jewels. The boy is presented to the king and his court, and is granted the privilege to become the companion of the king’s son. He is allowed to leave the underground kingdom and visit his home as often as he wishes. At one point, however, Elidyr tells his mother about the land and its immense riches. As a result, she urges him to bring her some gold, so he steals a golden bowl from the king’s son. The boy is to regret his decision bitterly, as he is immediately pursued by two little fairy folk and, as he trips at the threshold of his home, the golden ball is violently snatched from him. The fairies show him “every mark of scorn, contempt and derision.” After this unlucky adventure, he spends almost a year looking for the underground passage, but he never finds the tunnel again. Finally, he “became himself again” (“sibique restitutus”). Elidyr returns to school and finally becomes a priest, advancing in Church hierarchy and eventually working for bishop David (David II, bishop of St David’s and Gerald’s uncle). However, every time the bishop asks him questions about his childhood adventure, he is deeply touched and “bursts into tears”. What is interesting, he still remembers bits and pieces of the fairies’ language. Here the narrative follows with a philological discussion, but Gerald substitutes the fairy language with the Welsh language. Numerous words seem to derive from Greek, which is not surprising for Gerald since, following Geoffrey of Mont-

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mouth’s History, the Britons, came from Troy though Greece, so early Welsh must be similar to Greek in many respects [Gerald of Wales 1978: 135-136, 1868: 77].

The story shows Gerald’s predilection for the marvellous. The writer, however, finds it necessary to prove his credibility by including reflections on the truth of the story at the end of the chapter. He quotes ecclesiastical authorities on the subject, Augustine and Jerome:

But if you, careful reader, should ask me what I think of the truth of this little digression, I answer with Augustine that divine miracles should be wondered at, not subjected to contentious dissection. So, I will not, by denying the story, set limits to God’s power, nor, by affirming it, rashly stretch the truth farther than it should be stretched. In such matters, I always call to mind this quotation from Jerome: “You will find much that is incredible or improbable, but nonetheless true. For Nature is powerless against the Lord of Nature”. So, in accordance with Augustine’s dictum, I put this story and similar ones... with those matters that should be neither affirmed nor denied [Gerald of Wales 1978: 136].

Thus, the recorded mirabilia do not have to be in contradiction with rationalist view. They may belong to reality inaccessible to the powers of human mind, yet a true one. Therefore, all readers can do is to believe and marvel at what they cannot comprehend.

Gerald’s metaphoric journey through dense Welsh forests and impenetrable mountain landscape has political and cultural implications. Gerald is loyal to his archbishop and all the time remains by his side although he is aware of the archbishop’s contempt for Wales. Toward the end of the journey the archbishop jokes that there are no nightingales in Wales because they smartly refuse to go to such an unfriendly place. “We, however, are acting foolishly: we both penetrated into Wales and travelled all through it” [Gerald of Wales 1978: 185]. They travelled literally, treading Welsh routes and paths, but also symbolically, plunging into the untamed Celtic territory of unwritten culture, and, according to archbishop Baldwin, uncivilized people. Their journey brings to mind Eliodorus’s descent into the underground realm of fairies, the story of which was reported to Gerald orally, by his uncle, bishop David.

Gerald of Wales provides no explanation of the story, but it definitely offers several potential readings. Otter suggests that it illustrates potential conflict embedded in the text between fiction and referentiality. The boy’s childhood adventure seems to have taken place in a fictitious world, which he eventually gives up by choosing Latin training and ecclesiastical identity. His final decision is very difficult, though, as it is preceded by a long period doubt and uncertainty. What is more, it must be

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pointed out, that he enters the ecclesiastical Latin world only after intense infatuation with the idyllic fairyland which is to be associated with Welsh oral folklore [Otter 1996: 144-147].

Otter and Faletra emphasize similarities between Eliodorus and Gerald [Otter 1996: 146, Faletra 2014: 167]. Gerald is like Eliodorus in his mixed descent: his mother was Welsh and father Anglo-Norman. He experienced internal conflict of mixed national identities. At first he was more attracted to his father’s side – he studied in Paris and attempted to make ecclesiastical or court career in England. Only later he embraced his Welshness and redirected his energies on making a career in Wales. Thus, Gerald is similar to Eliodorus in his ambivalent attitude towards complex Welsh-English relations and in his overpowering nostalgia for the lost world of Welsh natural innocence. The boy from Gerald’s story is forever banished from that mythic underground. All he can salvage from that mysterious place are a few fairy words supposedly stemming from Greek and Trojan, but providing only an incomplete and fragmented picture of the past tradition. Longing for the Celtic past must be suppressed and can transpire into courtly texts only reshuffled with Latin learning and knowledge of Anglo-Norman realities.

To conclude, various literary texts written at the Angevin court, illustrate the ambivalent attitude of courtier-clerics towards multi-ethnic relations in that milieu. William of Malmesbury, who struggled with the complexities of his Anglo-Norman descent, used a disturbing literary image of deformed female twins, falling into decay. Geoffrey of Monmouth and Walter Map, both of Welsh-Norman parentage, expressed that anxious ambiguity by vivid images of conflicting races, struggling to achieve the dominant position, or dark, infernal regions, both unstable and incoherent. All writers attempted to provide an imaginative response to internally experienced tensions and finally turned to their native, mostly unwritten traditions. Geoffrey of Monmouth incorporated Arthurian myths and legends into learned Latin writing of the court. Walter Map drew extensively on the Welsh folklore. Recurrent images of marriage of a mortal (a heroic figure) with a fairy or with a daemon lover, which occur in De nugis curialium, may symbolize a fragile union between male, dominant Anglo-Normans and elusive, subdued Welshwomen; or more generally, between the dominant Anglo-Norman culture and peripheral Celtic traditions. Finally, the interest of Gerald of Wales in Welsh folk legends resulted in the literary creation of a journey image with its rich metaphoric potential.

Paradoxically enough, tensions and anxiety produced by the cultural diversity of the Angevin court were to be reconciled in the years to come, in a little village in Worcestershire, close to Walter Map’s home Hereford, far away from the royal court. A local priest, Layamon, writes in English the poem Brut, named after Brutus of Troy, the mythic founder of Britain. Layamon travelled widely through Britain and got three books: one in English (“that Saint Bede had made”), one in Latin (“that Saint Albin had made”) and one in French (“which a French cleric had made”) [Layamon 1996: ix]. The French book was in fact the Anglo-Norman translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia, comprised by the cleric Wace and commissioned by Henry II and Eleanor of Acquitaine. Thus, Welsh-English-Norman union was finally achieved, at least symbolically in terms of literature.
Bibliography


Summary

Multi-ethnicity of literary culture in courtly circles of 12th century England

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the ambivalent attitude of writers attached to the Angevin court towards multi-ethnicity of that milieu. Both, biographies and writings of those courtier-clerics show the subversive nature of the blend of national identities. William of Malmesbury, who was of Anglo-Norman parentage, used a disquieting literary image of a deformed female body, symbolizing imminent collapse of the cross-channel realm. Geoffrey of Monmouth, Walter Map and Gerald of Wales, all of Welsh-Norman descent, expressed their anxiety through disturbing images of conflicting races, infernal regions producing chaos and epistemological uncertainty, or through a richly metaphoric journey image. Finally, despite internally experienced tensions, all writers embraced their native oral traditions. Geoffrey of Monmouth appropriated Arthurian legends into the clerical literary discourse. Walter Map used elements of Celtic folklore, including fairy beliefs, to provide cultural continuity with the past culture. Finally, Gerald of Wales expressed his ambivalent attitude towards complex Welsh-English relations by assimilating the supernatural into the historical. As a result, those authors managed to encompass in their writings at least two separate literary traditions: on the one hand, Latin literary culture, on the other, oral vernacular folklore. Thus, unwritten, vernacular myths gradually penetrated into the official written culture.

Key words: multi-ethnicity, Latin, Norman, Welsh, courtly culture