CHAPTER 8

CROSSING THE BORDERS: LITERARY BORROWING IN MEDIEVAL WALES AND ENGLAND

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Despite the best efforts of specialists in Celtic studies over the past four decades, the temptation to characterize certain elements in Old French or Middle English romances and tales as “Celtic” seems still to be irresistible to many scholars. The ancient and long-discredited attempts of R. S. Loomis and his followers to find a “Celtic” hero lurking behind every knight, or a Welsh or Irish text behind every narrative element, have not, apparently, lost their attraction. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the supposedly Welsh setting of many French and English romances, and the high incidence of names of Welsh or Breton origin in such texts, most especially Arthurian narratives from Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes to Thomas Malory. Teasing out the relationship between, on the one hand, extant sources in Welsh (or in other Celtic languages) and, on the other, highly literary texts produced in very different social, political, linguistic, and cultural circumstances cannot proceed without an understanding of those circumstances. The interface between Welsh material and that read in England, whether in French or in English, should be seen as a two-way process.

In the multilingual context that developed in the centuries following the Norman Conquest, it was inevitable that Anglo-Norman tales and romances and French texts of Continental origin would circulate side by side in England, even to the extent that copies of certain texts of Continental origin were produced on both sides of the Channel: the early thirteenth-century romance of Perlesvaus is just one example. Many Middle English narrative texts, both Arthurian and non-Arthurian, derive from French originals, whether directly or indirectly. The question is whether certain elements within texts read in England, whether in English or in one of the varieties of French, might be characterized as “Welsh” or of Welsh origin and if so by what means they were sucked in to an English, Anglo-Norman, or French literary context.
It is, of course, thanks to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* and to the Norman-French version, the *Roman de Brut*, which Wace completed in 1155, that the Arthurian material came to be so widely disseminated in francophone circles. Without them, it is doubtful whether Chrétien de Troyes, in the late twelfth century, would have set so much of his work in the Arthurian world. It is Chrétien’s influential works, especially the *Conte del Graal* or *Roman de Perceval*, that provided the starting point for the development in subsequent decades of a massive body of Arthurian tales and romances. Some of these, like Chrétien’s own romances of *Perceval*, *Yvain*, and *Erec*, spawned versions in a staggering number of Western European languages, including the Welsh tales of *Peredur*, *Owein*, and *Geraint*. Even the more sprawling compositions of Chrétien’s successors, such as the so-called Vulgate Cycle and the even more massive Post-Vulgate Cycle, were widely copied and read, eventually giving rise in their turn to translations and adaptations, including, in English, substantial portions of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. Characters in these French and English narratives often have their counterparts in Welsh tradition, some, though not all, of which can be shown to be older. As Rachel Bromwich has shown, however, the personal names are virtually always detached from the story material in which they are embedded in the Welsh sources, the bearers of those names being transformed by French authors’ imaginations into literary constructs often very different from their counterparts in Wales.3

By the late twelfth century, thanks to Chrétien’s influential *Conte del Graal*, Perceval’s supposed Welsh identity and his epithet “li gallois” had been established, but comparison with the eponymous hero of the Welsh tale of *Peredur* reveals the immense gap between Welsh and continental perceptions of cultural identity and attributes. This is even more striking when we bear in mind the evident influence of the *Conte del Graal* on the surviving versions of *Peredur*. Similarly, although events in French Arthurian romances are often localized in what purports to be Wales, the geography, as indeed the descriptions of Welsh life and customs, undoubtedly owes more to French literary imaginations than to any historical or geographical reality.4 The contrast could scarcely be greater between the Wales of such texts and that depicted in the Anglo-Norman *Fouke le Fitz Waryn*, first composed in the late thirteenth century on the Marches of Wales, by an author who evidently had firsthand knowledge of both geography and people.5 Nonetheless, the translinguistic and transcultural migrations of continental French material were as important in Wales as in England. When fashion brought French Arthurian romances to Welsh audiences of the thirteenth century and beyond, characters corresponding to ones familiar in Welsh tradition could still be recognized despite their French trappings. They could thus be reinstated by translators or adapters into Welsh literary tradition, together with their new and often very different set of attributes and adventures.

The extent of the penetration of French, as well as English, culture within medieval Wales is not always fully appreciated, yet it is an essential component of the process of linguistic and literary interchange between all three cultures; an awareness of the nature and outcomes of this phenomenon is essential for understanding the context of production of texts and manuscripts, as well as for