

## **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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