

Myth Contact in Medieval England: the Birth of a Transnational Arthurian Mythology

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William the Conqueror's conquest of England in 1066 was a remarkable political, social, and linguistic upheaval. Nobody could deny this nearly one thousand years after the battle of Hastings. Nonetheless, the contact between Insular French¹ and Old English did not merely have as a consequence the mutation of Britannia's language. Indeed, if it has been established that language contact allows new linguistic forms to exist, it also provokes the disappearance or transformation of more ancient forms by means of, on the one hand, fast-acting changes that mainly modify lexicon and spelling and on the other, of long-term changes which focus on syntax, and morphology. Old English was, in the end, transformed by the Norman Conquest to the point that we cannot possibly consider Alfred and Ælfric's idiom as the ancestor of Chaucer and Shakespeare's language, although it is quite close to the Mercian dialect that became, after 1066, the base of the common language and the source of Modern English².

Whenever different ethnolinguistic groups meet each other, we are faced with, among other things, language contact. What this paper offers to consider, however, is the extension of this particular sociolinguistic concept to the sphere of the imaginary. For there is a kind of contact that remains highly underestimated and that we could call myth contact. Indeed, as soon as populations with a different culture meet each other, their respective myths start to interact just as their languages would. If a language is often associated with the soul of a people, it is because language is the very foundation upon which myths evolve for myths are, as René Girard noticed, the unknown voice of the real³. In other words, to understand the history and the evolution of a people imply to understand the link between linguistics and myths. This is especially interesting in the case of medieval England, given its rich and often troubled relationship with France. We will thus see how the contact between both countries provoked an evolution of Britannia's myths and turned the matter of Britain (Celtic and oral) into a transnational Arthurian mythology.

1 - Myth Contact

But first, what is myth contact? And why should myths interact like languages? Well, that is where it gets technical.

A myth is in many ways a marker of civilization, it bears witness to a unique mode of thinking and describing the world. It is the expression of an *imaginary*, that is to say, a symbolic way of apprehending our universe with images so as to develop a poetical feeling of the world⁴. And just like Indo-European languages, which possess a common origin, myths seem to possess a kind of universality. As Joseph Campbell explains in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*:

Whether we listen with aloof amusement to the dreamlike mumbo jumbo of some red-eyed witch doctor of the Congo, or read with cultivated rapture thin translations from the sonnets of the mystic Lao-Tse; now and again crack the hard nutshell of an argument of Aquinas, or catch suddenly the shining meaning of a bizarre Eskimo fairy tale: it will be always the

¹ The Normans did not bring with them one single variety of French. The language spoken in Normandy, which we will call Norman-French, arrived in England together with other dialects spoken in the North of France since William's army was not only composed of Normans. That variety, called Insular-French by André Crépin (2007), became the official language of the Court but never really influenced Old English. However, a few centuries after Hastings, the King of France conquered the dukedom of Normandy, which forced its nobility to choose whom they were to swear allegiance to. The English Crown thus switched from Parisian-French (the variety at the origin of standard French) to English, taking with them large quantities of alien words. That last variety, also called Old French, played an important role in the mutation of English.

² Mossé, Fernand and André Jolivet, *Manuel de l'anglais du Moyen Âge : des origines au XIV^e siècle*, Paris, Éditions Montaigne, 1945, vol.1, p. 21.

³ See René Girard, 2002.

⁴ Walter, Philippe, *Dictionnaire de mythologie arthurienne*, Paris, Imago, 2014, p. 9.

one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told⁵.

The similarity between different myths could, therefore, come from the universality of themes questioned by our stories. Nonetheless, it is also possible to establish a correlation between different mythologies. And just like it is possible to trace back the origin of the languages spoken in Eurasia to a proto-Indo-European root, we can identify a common origin to all Eurasian mythologies. George Dumézil and comparative mythology allowed us to see, for example, that Athena is merely the Hellenic echo of goddesses also present in Celtic, Germanic or Roman mythologies.

Myths and languages thus seem to share a common origin and development. Myth can be perceived as what Ferdinand de Saussure defined as *parole* or speech, yet everything that is justifiable in discourse can become myth since all things can have an oral status. In a poem entitled 'Mythopoeia', J.R.R. Tolkien associated mythological creation with the semiotic study of 'meanings independently from their content'⁶:

You look at trees and label them just so,
(for trees are 'trees', and growing is 'to grow');
you walk the earth and tread with solemn pace
one of the many minor globes of Space:
a star's a star, some matter in a ball
compelled to courses mathematical⁷...

The connection here between signifier and signified, symbolized by the tree as a physical tree and as a social construct, also evokes a linguistic development in which the mythical object would extricate itself from the rigid frame of language. Saussure established in his *Course on General Linguistics* a semiological system that would later be used by Roland Barthes for his own study of myths. The linguistic sign represents the indivisible association of a signified (concept) and signifier (acoustic image), however in this case, myth is nothing but a second-order semiological system based upon the preexistence of the Saussurian semiological chain. The linguistic sign, therefore, becomes the signifier of a second system. As Barthes himself explains, 'it just happens as though myth shifted the formal system of first meanings one step [along the chain]⁸'. We can thus see in Figure 1 that language on becoming an element used by myth in the construction of a new sign turns into a language-object, while the superiority of myth turns it into a metalanguage. The linguistic sign as the final element of the first chain (sense) is also reduced to the role of signifier (or form) in the mythological chain. This mythological signifier is then both sense and form, empty and meaningful for sense possesses a past and richness, yet in becoming form it empties itself and regresses. The form does not, however, completely destroy all traces of the previous sense: the transition depletes it, leaving it only with some semblance of strength that will fuel myth⁹. Both coexist since form draws strength from sense, which gives myth its ultimate depth. In other words, form produces a distance towards sense, which in its turn introduces form:

In the same way, when I am in a car and look at the landscape through the window, I can adjust at will to the landscape or the window: sometimes I will perceive the presence of

⁵ Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* [1949], London, Fontana Press, 1993, p. 3.

⁶ Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1957, p. 184.

⁷ Tolkien, J.R.R., (2003). 'Mythopoeia', in Tolkien, J.R.R. Tolkien, Christopher and Ferré, Vincent (Eds.), *Faërie et autres textes*, Paris, Christian Bourgois éditeur, 2003, p. 302.

⁸ Barthes, R., *op. cit.*, 1957, p. 187.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 190-191.

the window and the distance of the landscape and sometimes, on the contrary, I will perceive the transparency of the window and the depth of the landscape. But the result of this alternation will be constant: the window will both be present to me and empty; the landscape will both be real and sound¹⁰.

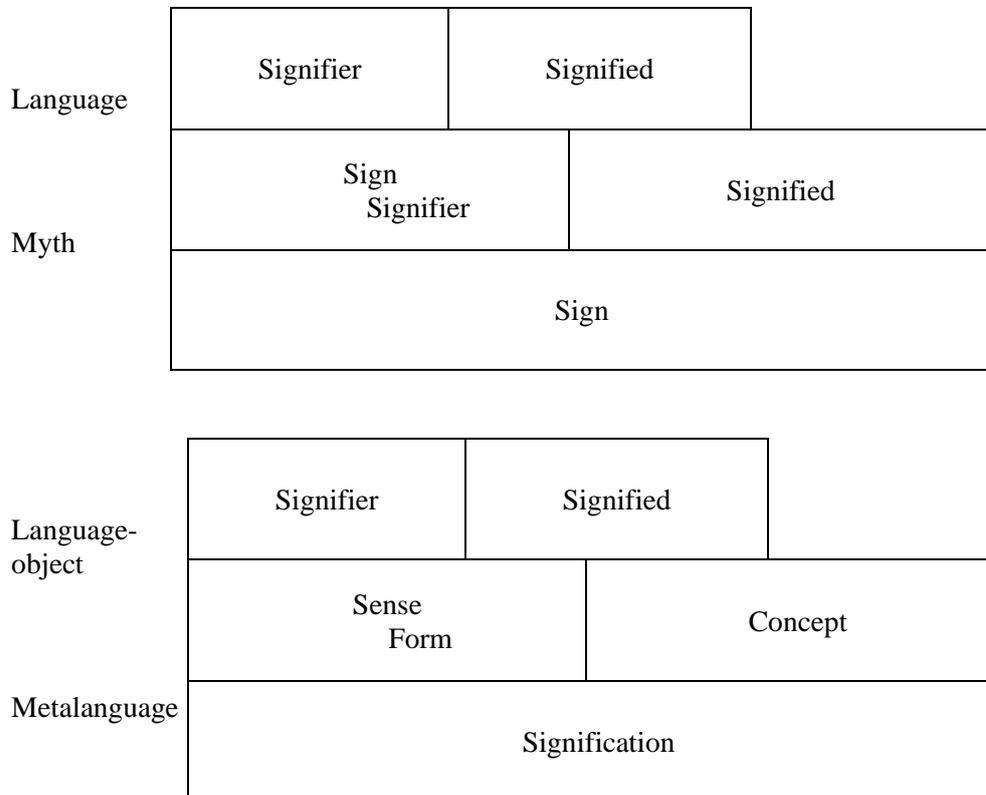


Figure 1. Second Semiological System

The signified can have an infinity of signifiers, which implies that the concept can equally possess several signifiers, whether it is a notion, a tale or a book (writing would be, in this example, the form of a literary myth). We thus often need neologisms to properly name such concepts. C.S. Lewis used, for instance, the word ‘Northness’ in order to describe what the North (with its languages, stories, art, and traditions) meant to him. The concept is, in other words, a blurred condensation of knowledge since there is a deformation between sense and concept that is not possible in the first semiological chain since a signified cannot transform an empty signifier¹¹.

The other particularity of the mythological system is based on the fact that the signification, namely myth itself (the association of a sense and a concept), is not completely arbitrary, unlike the linguistic sign. Indeed, signification is reasoned, which gives an infinite richness to myth, something that Barthes describes as a ‘luxury of significant forms¹²’. One can, as a result, appropriate a concept and impose one among many possible significations according to our expectations, desires, and culture. That is why the depletion of sense is fundamental, for myth can function with images whose sense has already been cleaned and which is ready to receive a

¹⁰ Barthes, R., *op. cit.*, 1957, p. 196.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194-195.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 199.

new signification. The decay of a myth can consequently be noticed by the arbitrariness of its signification.

In brief, myth colonizes the linguistic system: it steals language and transforms sense into form. Because of its low resistance, *langue* (or language) is the language form most channeled by myth, which can even completely divert a sense. For example, the formula 'E=mc²' seemed untouchable and protected against any possible reinterpretation, and yet it has become the symbol of 'mathematicity'.

Myth is thus fundamentally a second order linguist system, using language as a fertile ground which makes its relationship with historical sociolinguistic particularly interesting. An increased social interaction between two peoples or two different linguistic communities and colonialism are two of the main causes of language contact. But this interaction between people will also result in myth contact.

Let's take, as an illustration, the Christianization of Northern Europe. When Christian missionaries started to convert Northern European, they were confronted by a Pagan tradition whose founding myths were deeply different from those at the heart of Christianity. A religion is something much more difficult to impose than a new political order, which is why the Church decided to adapt the relatively new religion that was Christianity to Paganism and absorb some of its myths so as to ease conversion. Bede thus explains that Augustine often asked the Pope how to manage his church: besides questions about marriage, baptism and justice, Augustine asked what he was supposed to do with Pagan cult sites. Pope Gregory I answered:

I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed but only the idols in them. [...] Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, but let them slaughter animals for their own food to the praise of God¹³.

Gregory clearly wished to continue the *Interpretatio Christiana* which was central to the Church's expansion. He encouraged the Christianization of Pagan mythical symbols and accordingly saved familiar cult sites. This acculturation, however, did not stop there. Indeed, the Church's contact with Pagans provoked an evolution not only of the indigenous substratum but also a borrowing of local myths that became essential to the on-going Christianization. Women played, for instance, an essential role in Pagan societies thanks to their veneration of great goddesses – that was also the case in ancient Rome. Tacitus insists on this respect of women in *De Origine et situ Germanorum* and underlines the importance of monogamy in their society ('no other part of their culture could one praise more') and on the eternal alliance between men and women: 'Not only that, they even think that there is in them some holy and prophetic force, and they neither scorn their advice nor ignore their utterances¹⁴'. When Christianity evolved in Britannia, then, it kept this defining feature. Monasteries were, for example, largely run by women and a lot of female were canonized, like Saint Lioba or Hild, abbess of Whitby¹⁵. But the same is true throughout Northern Europe, which explains why the Church Fathers decided to bring to the fore the Virgin Mary as a way to fill a mythological gap that would help the conversion of indigenous Pagan populations who might have been troubled by a Patriarchal religion venerating Christ the King.

Nonetheless, unlike what we might think, this myth contact and the borrowings that took place did not lead to confusion or to the Pagans' incapacity to distinguish between the superstratum and substratum's mythological systems. Indeed, as Tolkien remarked, 'I think we may observe not confusion, a half-hearted or a muddled business, but a fusion that has occurred

¹³ Bede, McClure, Judith and Collins, Roger (Eds.), *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* [*Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, 731], trans. from Latin by B. Colgrave, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 56-57.

¹⁴ Tacitus, *Germania* [*De Origine et situ Germanorum*, 98], transl. from Latin by J.B. Rives, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999, p. 84.

¹⁵ Hindley, Geoffrey, *A Brief History of the Anglo-Saxons*, London, Robinson, 2006, p. 144.

at a given point of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotion¹⁶. This kind of contact, especially strong during a religious conversion, will lead to the simplification, disappearance or reinterpretation of certain myths while others will be borrowed, just like loan words, from the dominant culture. In some cases, it is even possible to find situations similar to multilingualism when several different mythologies coexist for a while within the same population. In some cases, we can even see examples of code-switching since Pagans had the ability to switch from one mythological system to another according to the sociocultural context in which they found themselves. Thor and Christ were, for instance, the main divinities of each culture and many people thus wore a pendant representing either Thor's hammer, Mjöllnir, or the Crucifix. The parallel between both divine figures is illustrated in the *Landnámabók*, which states that an Irishman named Helgi the Lean decided to settle to Scandinavia. Although Helgi was a devout Christian, he started to pray Thor during his journey across the sea. Archeologists have even found a mold allowing artisans to produce both a Crucifix and Mjöllnir, according to the demand¹⁷.

2 - From Celtic Mythology to Arthurian Legends

So what about France and England? The imposition of Norman continental feudalism and the language shift that eventually followed rapidly transformed local myths. But if the Anglo-Saxons' ancient Germanic tradition was all but wiped out following the arrival of William the Conqueror, the Celtic tradition, which had survived the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon tribes by being displaced to Ireland, Wales, and Armorica evolved differently. Oral conservatism had prevented Celtic mythology from disappearing in those regions. Indeed, the druids always forbade their apprentices the use of writing in order to develop their memory, which means that, unlike Rome or Greece, we do not possess a written account of their myths as they would have been transmitted during the Antiquity. They did continue to exist as an essentially oral set of stories for a long time but started to take a different shape when Irish monks began writing down the ancient Gaelic tradition. But in doing so, they added Christian references and those myths were, by a process of acculturation, revised, leaving us with an essentially distorted vision of the mythical nature of pre-Christian Britannia. This ancient Gaelic literature does not, however, offer a complete panorama of Celtic myths, and was not the only source of the many narratives that appeared during the Middle Ages, proving that a Celtic oral tradition still existed during the XIIth century¹⁸. I thus propose to consider the Arthurian *legends*, that is to say, the actual written texts from the XIIth century, as a remarkable example of myth contact within a culture struggling to adapt its Celtic, and Christian inheritance to the prestige of a new superstratum.

It has been suggested in the past, most notably by Tolkien¹⁹, that the Arthurian legends cannot be defined as part of an 'English mythology' because they have nothing to do with the English language. And it is indeed medieval French poets, Chrétien de Troyes being the most famous of them, who shaped Arthurian literature from the oral matter of Britain. Sir Thomas Malory was merely compiling and transforming French texts that were themselves inspired by an oral tradition unknown to Malory and which were, by the XVth century, completely lost.

Before European vernaculars started to fully develop, French clerks tried to give back to Old French²⁰ some of its prestige. Although courtly love poetry in vernacular was then spreading, it remained essentially oral and was not yet capable of competing with Latin, which is why Old

¹⁶ Tolkien, J. R. R., *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, in Tolkien, Christopher (Ed.), *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, London, HarperCollins Publishers, 2006, p. 20.

¹⁷ O'Donoghue, Heather, *From Asgard to Valhalla: the Remarkable History of the North Myths*, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2008, p. 60.

¹⁸ Walter, P., *Gauvain, le chevalier solitaire*. Paris, Imago, 2013, p. 31.

¹⁹ Tolkien, J.R.R. and Carpenter, Humphrey (Ed.), *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, New-York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000, p. 144.

²⁰ Old French, the ancestor of Modern French, belongs to the category of Oil languages that were spoken in the north of France.

French started to be used to translate the classics. Works such as the *Énéas* (1156-1160), the *Roman de Troie* (1165) or the *Roman de Brut* (1150) are thus all adaptations of Latin texts. Michel Rousse notes that the apparition of these works at the same period is not a coincidence²¹. Whereas others would have translated theological treatises, the clerks chose a different approach. For in deciding to adapt into Old French the stories narrating the fall of Troy, Aeneas's journey and the foundation of Britain by his descendant, Brutus, they gave themselves enough matter to shape an Arthurian literature in French that would glorify the new English monarchy. Wace, an Anglo-Norman clerk, was accordingly eager to offer the king his *Roman de Brut*, a translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* written only a few decades earlier. These texts turn Celtic myths into a pseudohistorical account of British history since the Antiquity and mention Arthur as a descendant of Brutus, ruling during the Vth century. This political propaganda was, in other words, used to legitimate and glorify the monarchs of the time but it certainly contributed to the development of Arthurian literature. These texts have indeed probably been composed at the court of Henry II Plantagenet, Duke of Normandy and King of England from 1154 to 1189. Henry II played an essential part in the development of this literature in marrying Eleanor of Aquitaine, who had just been rejected by her first husband, Louis VII. As Rousse explains:

this cultivated woman contributed to the diffusion of the lyrical tradition from the Pays d'Occ: her grandfather, William IX of Poitier, had been the first troubadour. It is thus possible that this Anglo-Norman environment saw the development of a literary mode that endeavored to make accessible to readers who could not understand Latin some of the great texts from the Antiquity, adapted to current tastes, and marked by the new conception of love sung by the troubadours²².

It is therefore not surprising that Bernard de Ventadour, one of the greatest troubadours of his time, stayed in London between 1154 and 1173, and composed a song there for Eleanor and Henry. Wace also wrote between 1160 and 1174 his *Roman de Rou* in which he tells the King, this time, the history of the Dukes of Normandy.

Chrétien de Troyes remains, however, the most notable force in the myth contact that occurred following the Norman Conquest. *Érec et Énide* (1170), the first Arthurian story written in a Romance language, represents the link, or as Chrétien puts it, the *conjointure*²³ between the matter of Rome, of Britain and courtly love. Celtic myths were most notably assimilated and reinterpreted in order to be compatible with the newly born genre of chivalric romance. Chrétien thus mentions several times in *Érec et Énide* his willingness to not betray his *estoire* (l. 3586, 5730 and 6728), both in the respect of the names of his characters – Érec is the Romance equivalent of the Armorican Guerec and Weroc and of the Welsh Gereint – and the themes of the story. Let's take one particular example representative of the transformation of a Celtic myth in contact with France, namely the hunt of the white stag. It occurs at the beginning of Chrétien's poem and comes, from Celtic mythology where it announces the passage into the other world. But despite the richness of his mythical borrowings and the intertextuality of his poetry, we see in *Érec et Énide* Chrétien's ability to transform and modernize the matter of Britain. The hunt of the white stag as a mythological concept loses, in this case, its original sense in contact with the troubadour tradition and receives, as a result, a new signification. The myth evolves and joins the courtly love tradition as a new sign: instead of announcing the passage in the other world, the hunt of the white stag results now in a kiss given by the King to the most beautiful lady of his court. The mythological signifier has changed, resulting in a new sign.

²¹ Troyes, Chrétien de, and Rousse, Michel (Ed.), *Cligès, Philomena, Chansons*, Paris, Éditions Flammarion, 2006b, p. iii.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Prologue, l. 14. Chrétien defines the word 'conjointure' as a blend of different traditions.

The Arthurian romance is consequently incomprehensible without the knowledge of Celtic (Welsh and Gaelic) mythology. Its themes, symbols, and names require a real understanding of insular Celtic civilization, which managed to keep its ancient inheritance well into the Middle Ages in Ireland, Wales and Armorica²⁴. In other words, Chrétien modernized his sources and turned the magical dimension of ancient Celtic myths into essential elements of a Christian chivalric romance that link insular myths with continental mythical structures. As Philippe Walter writes, ‘medieval Christianity reframed the old pagan mythology that preceded it in Occident: it inserted itself into it, it used it by “Christianizing” it. This “Christian” mythology (as we have called it since Pierre Saintyves) is an amalgam of Biblical themes and pagan beliefs. Arthurian literature does not escape this acculturation and the Grail tradition is here to bear witness to this²⁵’.

As a conclusion, we can say that the Norman conquest of England did not really deprive Britain of his native myths. The linguistic situation was certainly difficult for the Anglo-Saxons following the battle of Hastings and the words ‘linguicide’ and ‘linguistic suicide’ have often – and quite rightly – been used to describe what happened in England at the time. Yet, the language and myth contact that occurred gave a new dimension to the Celtic mythology that had survived the Anglo-Saxons’ arrival. The matter of Britain, which was already an amalgam of ancient Gaelic traditions, Christian myths, all carefully balanced until at least the XIIth century by a strong oral tradition was again transformed when Old French and the troubadours started to adapt not only stories but complete indigenous mythical structures.

French clerks such as Chrétien de Troyes then transmitted their success to their disciples across Europe, from Iceland to Italy. Arthurian mythology thus became the first great European literature, representative of a transnational imaginary: it enriched the ancient Celtic tradition and developed it around a new sensibility and mode of thinking giving Occidental Europe a common cultural horizon.

²⁴ Walter, P., *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.