Monica Oancă[*]

MARIE DE FRANCE'S ELIDUC*: AN EXAMPLE OF 12TH-CENTURY TRANSNATIONAL LITERARY CHARACTER?*

Keywords*: medieval; Christianity; courtly love; code of chivalry; ethical community*

Abstract*: In this article, I have tried to analyse to what extent Eliduc, the protagonist of the 'lai' with the same name written by Marie de France, can be considered a transnational hero and if such a theme as nationality is relevant to 12th-century Britain. As Marie de France translated her lais from Breton into Anglo-Norman (French), it goes without saying that both the audience and the author were aware of a linguistic difference, but the most difficult part was the 'translation' or rather the interaction between different mentalities, from different geographical and social backgrounds.*

After reading Adrian Hasting's theory, I have come to the conclusion that although the matter of nationality is relevant to the 12th-century Western Europe, this issue cannot be clearly determined in the narrative of the lai, as there are many contradictory aspects in Eliduc's behaviour. However if one also considers the intended audience of the lai, the idea of nationality is made more obvious, as several elements which belong to the Anglo-Norman chivalric code (like actions dictated by fin'amour) are contrasted with details which may be associated with a specific Celtic background (for instance a harmonious blending of magical and Christian beliefs). The superiority of the Christian element (which is common to both mentalities in different ways) is made obvious by all the main characters' final retreat from worldly pleasures, in order to embrace a monastic life.

My conclusion is that Eliduc is a Celtic (Breton) hero, ingeniously transformed for an Anglo-Norman audience and his actions are the result of these two influences. Even though the nationality of the main characters is not clearly defined, they are people who are comfortable in a different environment than their native one.

It has been repeatedly said that the idea of nationality cannot be discussed in a medieval context and that nations, as imagined communities, were actually formed around the 18th century. Since I do not agree with this assessment, I want to prove that the matter of nationality is relevant to the 12th-century Angevin Empire. The starting point for my analysis is Adrian Hastings' essay on The Construction of Nationhood, but I have also used David Miller's study *On Nationality*.

I will argue that several specific cultural elements which are representative for Celtic ethnicity can be identified in *Eliduc*, a lai written by Marie de France, while weighing to what extent they entitle us to talk about the awareness of nationhood. Of the different aspects of nationality, I will focus on the ethical one and I will discuss its significance in *Eliduc*.

[*] University of Bucharest, Romania.

Theorising about Nationhood – the Medieval Roots of Nationality

I want to present in a few words Adrian Hastings' theory on nationhood (developed in his work on *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, 1997). The first element to point out is that the idea of nationality, i.e. belonging since birth to a community identifiable by certain characteristics, has deep medieval roots and it predates the state formation. His tenet is that one of the first nationalities to be formed was the English one, as they can trace the awareness of belonging to a nation to the 8th century (a fact proven by Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*) or the 9th century (as King Alfred the Great encouraged the translation of important texts into the Anglo-Saxon language). After discussing the historical circumstances, Hastings emphasises that: "it is evidence of the national maturity of the English by the twelfth century that they could willingly admit to a diversity of real or mythical origins, Trojan and Roman, British, English, Danish and Norman" (172).[1]

He clearly differentiates between ethnicity[2] and nationality[3] and he shows that a certain ethnicity will demand political self-determination only if the members do not feel free to manifest their specific character (customs, language, clothes, etc). So in medieval times there was no need for such a political demand since the Breton or other Celtic nations could express themselves unhampered.

He equally insisted on the importance of territoriality[4] for the formation of a nation. The Celts in Brittany, Cornwall or Wales had a clearly defined territory, even though the Anglo-Normans tried to impose their authority on it. Nonetheless there are exceptions like the Hebrews, who survived as a distinct nationality without a territory for almost two thousand years. Naturally in this instance it was religion which provided the unifying principle. Thus, it must be pointed out that an important element in the structure of a nationality is religion,[5] a fact relevant to the Celts as well.

The Celtic nations, like the Welsh, existed in medieval times, even if the way in which they conceived their nationality was different from the English approach. In order to identify several characteristics which distinguish medieval Welsh from the Anglo-Norman

[1] Referring to the English, he continues: "The tolerant ethnic pluralism of a mature nation presupposes a confident territoriality" (172).

[2] "By ethnicity I mean the common culture whereby a group of people share the basic of life – their cloth and clothes, the style of houses, the way they relate to domestic animals and to agricultural land…the rituals of birth, marriage and death, . . . the proverbs, songs, . . . shared history and myth . . . . All this is shared through a spoken language" (167).

[3] For instance the Scottish nation was formed out of two distinct ethnicities: the Scots in the South, South-East and the Gaelic in the North-West; furthermore there was some debate in the 16th century related to whether Scots was a different language from English (as Dutch and German) or whether it was the same. However, in the 17th century "Scotland veered steadily towards being a mono-ethnic state with a colonial Gaelic fringe, just as England veered towards being a mono-ethnic state with a colonial Welsh fringe" (Hastings 71).

[4] It was a distinct territoriality which determined the formation of the American nation, although for decades they prided with being English, and even more traditionally English than the English (74-5).

[5] Consequently there were important consequences in re-defining English identity when the shift from universal Catholicism to localised Protestantism (Anglicanism) occurred.

invaders, Hastings points out that: "language, law, literature, a sense of historic identity, a particular kind of culture sustained by the order of bards" show that Wales was "by the mid-eleventh century well past the dividing line between ethnicity and nation" (Hastings 69). Bernard, the first Norman bishop of St David's, also acknowledged the fact that the Welsh were a "nation" distinct by "habits, modes of judgement and customs" (Hastings 17). Therefore by the end of the 12th century, the period when Marie de France wrote her lais, there was an accepted awareness of the Welsh being different from the Anglo-Normans.

On the other hand there were ethnicities (among whom Breton and Cornish), which "were neither fully distinct, nor fully integrated" in the "circle of the nation closest to them" (H 115). In order to understand the relations between the Celtic populations one detail is important, namely that there were similarities between some Celtic languages like old Cornish and old Breton, which, according to Price (5), are also similar to old Welsh, a situation which is the result of historical circumstances.

It is a proven fact that there was a migration of populations from Cornwall into Brittany in the early Middle Ages,[6] when the Anglo-Saxon reached their lands, and as a result the tip of the Breton peninsula has preserved the name Cornouaille,[7] while, naturally, strong connections between these two areas were forged. At the same time, Wales has always been considered a point of reference for Celtic identity, as it has succeeded to preserve a partial autonomy.

Eliduc, the ill-treated Breton knight, who felt the need to go into exile because of the calumnies and the envy he had had to face at the court of his king in Brittany, arrived in Britain (Devon[8]-Cornwall area), and went up on the river Dart until Toteneis (Totnes), a town where a castle was built soon after the Norman Conquest, and from there to Excestre (Exeter), the capital of the area, an area were different Reis (kings or princes) were fighting one another. Such a scene was not completely imaginary, since at that time such situations were common in Wales, described by Hastings as a "geographical area in the grip of one or another war lord, subject to much mutual raiding and highly vulnerable to attack from outside" (68). The arrival of a Breton knight in Cornwall, a knight who was given authority over the area was not unheard of, either, since, when Normans came, dominium over Cornwall was requested by a Breton knight, Brian of Brittany (who might have been appointed the first Earl of Cornwall by William the Conqueror) and one of his duties was to keep the area under control, including Exeter.

The first element that is noticed when reading *Eliduc* is that the hero has no difficulty in entering the British aristocratic society, as no difference in language, customs or manners is mentioned. Secondly, I would like to point out that the proverbs (which are listed by Hastings as a defining element for an ethnicity (167), proverbs that Eliduc is so fond of, as he quotes several both home in Brittany and in Britain) are quite familiar to

[6] Equally people migrated from Ireland to Northern Britain, which resulted in establishing a kingdom by the Irish Dal Riata in what is now Argyll (Price 35).

[7] Cornouaille (in Breton: Kernev), in the southwest of Brittany, France, whose name is cognate with Cornwall (in southwest of Britain), was settled by migrant princes from Cornwall (during the Anglo-Saxon invasions). The Bishopric of Cornouaille was founded by ancient saints from the Cornwall region.

[8] Devon was regarded as part of the Brittonic world for a long time (Price 8).

the knights he talks to in Exeter.[9] They feel strengthened by these words of wisdom and they follow and trust him.

Therefore there is a clear similitude between the Breton traditions (language, names[10]) and the customs to be found in the South-West of England, as presented in *Eliduc*. There remains to investigate in what sense this shared ethnicity may become the seed of a shared nationality, since "a nation is a far more self-conscious community than an ethnicity" (Hastings 3), and yet "ethnicity turns naturally in certain circumstances into nationhood" (Hastings 13). In the next part I will try to see if Eliduc recognises the people he encounters in the south-west of Britain as his compatriots, since he appears to share their ethnicity.

The Ethical Dimension of Nationality: Domination by Munificence versus Loyalty towards Their Own Ethnicity

When discussing the matter of nationality, the first issue is to point out several aspects that characterise it. According to David Miller (*On Nationality*, a work quoted by Adrian Hastings, as well), there are several features that define nationality: mutual recognition (conationals recognise each other as part of a large group who share certain beliefs and commitments), sharing a geographical space, existence of an ethical community (which implies certain obligations towards one's conationals), a common activity and goal (nations are communities which do things together), a common public culture referred to as having a "national character" (Miller 22-23). Since not all features can be discussed here, I have chosen to emphasise only the ethical dimension and to analyse in what way Eliduc acknowledges his responsibilities towards his conationals.

Miller asserts that "nations are ethical communities. In acknowledging a national identity, I am also acknowledging that I own special obligations to fellow members of my nation which I do not owe to other human beings" (Miller 49). Thus when universal moral principles are in conflict with the principle of loyalty to one's nation, in the mind of a person there is a clash between ethical impartiality and ethical partiality (i.e "showing preference to your own community", Miller 53). Eliduc is faced twice with the choice of showing his loyalty to his people. The first time, when he is unfairly treated by his king, he addresses his neighbours and fellow knights, talking about one's duty to make himself loved by his equals. He quotes a proverb: If one is a wise person, he feels loyalty towards his liege lord, but towards his neighbours he feels love (S'il est sages è vedzieuz./Ki leauté tient à sun Seignur, /Envers ses bons veisins amor, Eliduc 61-6). Yet, although he mentions his closeness to his neighbours, he leaves them and his loving wife to go into exile, allowing for his (selfish) need to prove himself according to the code of chivalry.

[9] Ki en tel liu ne va suvent,/U il guide perdre ascient;/U jà guères ne gainera,/Ne en grant pris ne muntera (He, who does not often go in such a place where he expects to lose, will not win any wars, nor will he gain any great prize, *Eliduc* 187-190).

[10] The name of the British princess, Guillardun, has a similar sound with the name of his noble Breton wife, Guildeluec, and they are probably of Breton origin. Originally the *lai* had this Breton title: *Guillardun and Guideluec* as Marie considered it to be more appropriate, yet the simpler name *Eliduc* remained.

Secondly, once Eliduc is overseas, he finds a generous king and a loving young lady, yet he behaves disloyally to both by taking the girl from her father. Once the naïve young princess leaves her native shores, she will never come back to her people, nor will she be in any contact with them. So apparently no duty or feelings of belongingness are visible in Eliduc's behaviour (or in Guillardun's). At the same time, Eliduc is aware of his duty as a vassal of the king of Brittany (Bretaine) and he obeys his summoning, and serves him as a trusted adviser after his return (Eliduc 1007). So although he has left his country, he squanders no opportunity to regain his position there.

Another point to consider is that Eliduc reacts well and is appreciated when there is a crisis, in other words he is capable of both undertaking heroic acts and giving wise advice when fighting a foreign force. Such an instance might be associated with Hastings' observation on "the mythologisation of threats to national identity", when the malevolent actions of a common enemy may "sharpen up the sense of 'us' and 'them', the absolute duty of loyalty to the horizontal fellowship of 'us,'" and it emphasises or creates "a moral gap separating us from the other" (190-1). Thus Eliduc may be regarded as a protector, who is superior to the knights he finds in Britain, whom he teaches and leads into battle. On the other hand he does not feel bound to them.

In order to evaluate Eliduc's position, one has to discuss the 12th-century political context and more specifically the Anglo-Norman's behaviour towards the Celtic people (either Welsh or Breton) they attempted to dominate. It must be pointed out that they did not always try to impose their supremacy by force, but very often they displayed the so called "dominance by munificence" (Davies 54), inviting the chieftains (princes or kings) to the English king's residence and high table, offering them different gifts, initiating the young aristocratic men into knighthood[11] or arranging different marriages for them.

The Welsh more than the Scots opposed the intrusion and recognised the fact that "as a Welsh chronicler put it sourly, deceiving with promises . . . was the custom of the French" (Davies 54). Yet, sometimes the Celtic aristocrats regarded the favour and protection of the Anglo-Norman kings and magnates as social advancement. The ethical aspect of nationhood is questioned in such a situation of indebtedness to a foreign lord, while having obligations towards their own people.

Considering Eliduc's tale against the background I have outlined, one cannot miss the general story pattern of a continental knight, who arrives in a foreign place and starts teaching the knights how to fight and win a war against invaders. In other words it can be interpreted as a legend of a civilising hero, coming from a modern (although morally corrupt) area in Brittany (France) to Western Britain, where he is quickly welcomed and immediately given the responsibility of leading the attack in order to restore peace in the area.

Eliduc is not only successful, but charming and courtly, so the princess falls in love, abandoning her country, father and social position to follow him. He takes her to his land without making any preparations and hiding from her the truth about his situation.

[11] David, the youngest brother of the king of Scotland and his heir, was knighted by Henry I and he "cocooned David in a web of munificence and obligation" which brought its reward when David succeeded to the throne in 1124 (Davies 50-1).

As a result, from an innocent, honest young lady, Guillardun becomes a disobedient ungrateful daughter and a potential adulteress.[12] In a way, there is also moral dishonesty embedded in the chivalric image of the winner.

Despite my attempts to find ethical evidence that Eliduc could be referred to as a national Celtic (either Breton or Cornish) hero, I do not think that the text supports such an interpretation. However, Marie de France did not only record the tales she heard in Brittany, but also translated them and presented them in front of an aristocratic Anglo-Norman audience. One can witness Marie's care for the correct translation of words, especially the names, in an attempt to make herself better understood. The best example can be found in the beginning of the lai called 'Laustic' (Laustic ad nun ceo m'est avis, Si l'apelent en lur pais: Ceo est reisun en Franceis, E Nihtenale en dreit Engleis. Laustic, it is named, which I've heard them say in their country, which is 'rossignol' in French and 'nightingale' in good English).[13]

Reading the lai is a complex endeavour, as the process of linguistic translation comes secondary to the cultural one. The lais, sung by the minstrels or troubadours, might be considered examples of the traditional Breton (maybe even Celtic) type of civilization.[14] On the other hand the social background of the Anglo-Norman noblemen influenced Marie's rendering of events and, thus, a hero, departing from a Breton environment, had to behave according to the chivalric Anglo-Norman (French) custom. Consequently, Eliduc, whether he had originally been regarded as a Celtic hero or not, had to conform to the well-established courtly rules.

Eliduc – Characteristics of Celtic identity

In the last part of my paper I want to analyse if there are elements in *Eliduc* which could be considered Celtic, and to what extent they can characterise Eliduc's national identity. Setting aside the ethical feature of nationality, I will focus on the religious factor (which according to Adrian Hastings is essential in shaping national awareness). When discussing the importance of religion for nationality, one thing is sometimes emphasised, namely the legendary (or historical) moment of origin which acts as a unifying point for a nation. One such example is the existence of a Christianising hero like Saint Patrick or Saint David[15] in Wales, or even Saint Piran or

[12] Guillardun is so shocked to find out the truth, that she faints and falls into a death-like trance.

[13] A similar discussion can be found at the beginning of other *lais* like *Chevrefoil* or *Bisclavret* (Bisclaveret ad nun en Bretan, Garwall l'apelent li Norman – "Bisclaveret" is named in Breton, "Garwolf" is called by the Normans).

[14] In 1176 a Welsh magnate held a famous assembly of poets and musicians in Cardigan and his action was considered to have been "something significantly national" (Hastings 69) with a specific Celtic character.

[15] He became renowned as a teacher and preacher, founding monastic settlements and churches in Wales, Dumnonia, and Brittany. St David's Cathedral stands on the site of the monastery he founded in the Glyn Rhosyn valley of Pembrokeshire. He became a bishop and presided over two synods against Pelagianism: Brefi (c. 560) and Caerleon (c. 569) – "the Synod of Victory". He is regarded as the one under whose supervision Wales, as well as Cornwall and Brittany were further Christianised.

Pyran (Cornish, Peranin) the patron saint of Cornwall.[16] Sometimes one saint can become a unifying factor, connecting several areas, like for instance Saint Budoc of Brittany (also known as Budeaux or Beuzec), bishop of Dol, who is celebrated both in Brittany and in Devon[17] (on the 8th and respectively 9th of December).

Anglo-Normans showed a great interest in "the traditions they had inherited with their new territorial possessions" (Bradley 45). So the local saints were treated with respect and many saga-like stories about their lives started to be written, tales which chronicled their detailed genealogy, and quite often an adventurous youth. This sacred type of literature influenced other works as well, and consequently the twelfth century is described as "the period in which stories started to be told for their own sake and creative literature appeared" (Bradley 59); the lais written by Marie de France being such instances.

The Christian element is very strong in *Eliduc*, and, moreover, all magical occurrences are doubled and confirmed by Christian manifestations. Guillardun's life is restored through a miraculous intervention (the wondrous flower), and, since she had been placed in the chapel of a saint hermit (seinz hermites), the miracle is not outside the Christian influence. Once Guillardun is saved by Guildeluec, the conundrum they are all placed in needs a solution, as Eliduc cannot keep both his wife and his beloved. The wise generous matriarch preserves her dignity intact, as well as her social position,[18] and chooses to enter a nunnery, founded and richly endowed by Eliduc, whose abbess she will be.

This lai could be an example of a couple who started by loving each other, only to realise that their love for God is deeper and more durable, and thus it may be interpreted as an "abandonment of the world and a turn to spiritual life" (Kinoshita 90). Therefore there are several details that connect Eliduc with the (more or less legendary) tales recording the lives of saints.

Loyalty to local saints can be a sign of structuring a national distinct identity, and this was the case in Cornwall, where "devotion to local saints seems to have remained strong through the tenth and eleventh centuries" (Bradley 37). Conforming to the (national) traditions, Eliduc also shows great devotion to the hermit that lives close to his domain. Another proof of the fact that he values his roots and tries to conform to the established rules in his country is that whenever he is in trouble he quotes proverbs, which contain the traditional wisdom, and more importantly he tries to ask the advice of the wise people of his country. ("la sage gent del' païs", *Eliduc* 926) Nevertheless he breaks the well-known Christian rules, perhaps due to the innovative mentality connected to fin'amour,[19] and he deceives both his wife and the innocent princess.

[16] Another important Cornish saint was Saint Petroc or Petrock, whose relics were stolen in the 12th century and taken to Brittany. The thief tried to determine Geoffrey, the earl of Brittany, soon to be duke of Brittany, to keep them and to try to acquire the duchy of Cornwall, too (Everard 96).
[17] A kingdom in northern Brittany, Domnonia, was founded by migrants from Dumnonia. (Devon, Great Britain)
[18] Entering a monastery was possible only for rich, and thus aristocratic, people (Milis 44).
[19] fin'amor ("fine love"), in Provençal and French is the term used in the medieval times to define courtly love.

Consequently, it seems that the cultural background in the lais is based equally on Christian spirituality and on magical beliefs in the supernatural;[20] and this perfect blending of Christianity and magic is the landmark of the Breton lais and perhaps of Celtic culture in general. In *Eliduc* there is a harmonious balance between magical and Christian elements given that magic and Christianity complement each other, and, moreover, thrive together, bringing solutions and happiness to people.

Conclusions

At this stage in my analysis, the question in the title proves not in the least rhetorical. The answer vacillates between yes and no, depending on which aspects of the matter are discussed. So, firstly, since I have proven that the issue of nationhood and nationality can be discussed in the 12th-century Angevin Empire, it follows that Eliduc, crossing the sea from one geographical area to another, suffers a transfer from one nationality to another. Yet, I have also pointed out that there were no significant differences related to language, proverbs, or manners in general, between the two areas sharing Celtic features.

Secondly, when the ethical dimension of nationality is taken into consideration, Eliduc does seem to favour his native king and does not show loyalty to the foster one, Guillardun's father. So he seems to feel the difference between his conationals and the foreigners. On the other hand his disloyalty could be dictated more by the code of fin'amour, which considered romantic love more important than any other allegiance. Moreover, neither is Eliduc ever treated as a foreigner, who needs to be integrated in a different society, nor is Guillardun regarded as an outsider on the other side of the channel, but rather she is comforted and reassured of the rightfulness of her new position in her new environment. So again the answer is not clearly decided.

Thirdly, when the importance of religion is considered and the fact that local saints are important for establishing and upholding a national identity, Eliduc again seems deeply reverent towards a national, local hermit and to the wisdom of his elders. However Gillardun's people are also Christian and I believe that Christianity is foundational for Celtic identity and thus shared equally by people on both sides of the channel in a more mystical way than the audience who listened to the lai written by Marie de France.

So I would conclude that Eliduc can be perceived as a transnational hero (or literary character), but not because he moves geographically from one nation to another, but rather because he is a character moving in an environment which is equally Christian and magic, in a blend which defines it as uniquely Celtic, but which is translated and presented to an audience of a different nationality, hence his actions are influenced by codes which are specific to the conquerors' mentality, like the fin'amour. Eliduc is a Celtic (Breton) hero, subtly transformed for an Anglo-Norman audience for the purpose of entertaining and perhaps educating them and his behaviour shows that, far from barbarous and ungovernable, the Celtic societies at the fringes of their empire are cultivated, refined and able to learn the chivalric ways and to be integrated successfully into the multinational construct which was the dominating Angevin Empire.

[20] One such instance is the fact that a shape-changing knight (Muldumarec) is asked to prove his Christianity and he receives the Holy Communion (*Yonec*). It is perhaps the most obvious instance in which Christianity is absorbed into a magical creature.

Works Cited

Mary de France. *Poèsies*. Paris: Imprimerie de Decourchant, 1832. Print.
Bradley Ian. *Celtic Christianity Making Myth and Chasing Dreams*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999. Print.
Davies, R. R. *Domination and Conquest. The Experience of Ireland, Scotland and Wales 1100-1300*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Print.
Everard Judith Ann. *Brittany and the Angevins*. Province and Empire 1158-1203. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.
Hastings, Adrian. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Print.
Kinoshita Sharon, and Peggy McCracken. *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Print.
Koch John T. Antone Minard, ed. *The Celts: History, Life, and Culture*, ABC-CLIO, LLC: Santa Barbara, 2012. Print.
Kruger Roberta. "Marie de France." *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing*. Ed. Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 172-183. Print.
Lavezzo Kathy, ed. *Imagining a Medieval English Nation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. Print.
Miller, David. *On Nationality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Print.
Pittock, Murray. *Celtic Identity and the British Image*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999. Print.
Price, Glanville, ed. *The Celtic Connection*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Limited, 1992. Print.
Whalen, Logan E. *Marie de France and the Poetics of Memory*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008. Print.
---, ed. *A Companion to Marie de France*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2011. Print.