Introduction

The linguistic history of Britain often surfaces in unexpected contexts in twelfth-century literature. Discussions of the development and decline of languages facilitated the consideration of the political fortunes of speech communities, the historical interaction between peoples, and the nature of genealogical descent. Interpretations of language history ranged from those prompted by the demands of serious scholarship to those of a more whimsical character. At the height of Henry II's power in the early 1180s, one of his courtiers exasperatedly complained that there was only one other court which was as incessantly peripatetic: the supernatural band of followers of Herla, an ancient British king. The despairing courtier was the cleric and Latin satirist Walter Map (d.1209/10), who explained the paranormal compulsion behind Herla's enforced wanderings. A pygmy king had appeared to the surprised Herla, and suggested that they should be guests at each other's weddings. That very day, ambassadors arrived to propose a marriage to the daughter of the king of the Franks, and in due course, the pygmy attended the ceremony and catered for all the guests magnificently. In turn, Herla came to the pygmy's own wedding feast, held in an underground palace lit by innumerable lamps, but only approachable through a dark cave at the foot of a cliff. On his departure, the pygmy gave Herla a small bloodhound, and sternly enjoined him to not alight from his horse before the dog had jumped down. The party emerged into the light, and the king immediately asked an old shepherd (*ueteranus pastor*) for news of his queen. To his horror, the shepherd was barely able to comprehend his archaic language:

> Domine, linguam tuam uix intelligo, cum sim Saxo, tu Brito; nomen autem illius non audiui regine, nisi quod aiunt hoc nomine dudum dictam reginam antiquissimorum Britonum que fuit uxor Herle regis, qui fabulose dicitur cum pigmeo quodam ad hanc rupem disparuisse, nusquam autem postea super terram apparuisse. Saxones uero iam ducentis annis hoc regnum possederunt, expulsis incolis.

1

> Sir, I can hardly understand your speech, for you are a Briton and I a Saxon;
> but the name of that Queen I have never heard, save that they say that long
> ago there was a Queen of that name over the very ancient Britons, who was
> the wife of King Herla; and he, the old story says, disappeared in company
> with a pygmy at this very cliff, and was never seen on earth again, and it is
> now two hundred years since the Saxons took possession of this kingdom,
> and drove out the old inhabitants.[1]

In his distress on hearing this news, one of the courtiers dismounted from
his horse, and crumbled to dust as soon as his feet touched the ground.
Herla then understood that they were condemned to wander the earth for-
ever, as the dog, it seemed, would never alight.

The story draws its inspiration from various folk tales circulating in the
Anglo-Norman realm of an eternally nomadic spectral host; Map's particu-
lar interpretation satirically emphasises the vacuity of the peregrinations of
Henry's court, perhaps implicitly contrasting it with divine stability.[2] Yet
if the pygmy's mansion is situated in an unspecified otherworld, Map is at
pains to locate Herla's later career in a Britain contiguous to the twelfth-
century Henrician realm. In making an imaginative leap into the mind of
a Saxon shepherd, he draws on the body of knowledge which forms the
central concern of this study: the history of Britain's vernacular languages.
For Map, the best way of indicating the passage of time is to dwell on the
difficulties of communication experienced by Herla, whose British is now
both lexically and politically outdated. It is made clear that the shepherd's
choice of language has been dictated by the Saxon invasion of Britain, but
other aspects of this linguistic conquest seem less complete. Ignoring the
fact that English and British were not mutually intelligible, Map depicts
the Saxon shepherd as still just (*uix*) able to understand Herla, who in turn
is able to assimilate the shepherd's information. This continuity of com-
prehension implies that more is at stake here than linguistic verisimilitude.
The shepherd, by inhabiting the same place as the king, seems to have
inherited some knowledge of his language: Saxon and British culture are
linked by their shared territory.

We might ask whether this depiction of a linguistic past which commu-
nicates across conquest also figures a different dialogue with insular history:
the engagement of Map's own contemporaries with the Anglo-Saxon era.
Twelfth-century history writing shows a desire to understand the motiva-
tions behind the events of 1066, and to uncover or to create connections to
earlier times. In part, this florescence of historiography was prompted by
practical concerns as monasteries sought to defend the rights and property
they had enjoyed before the Conquest. However, the variety, inventiveness,

and sheer scope of twelfth-century historical enquiry show that an inter-est in the past extended far beyond mere pragmatism: the grandchildren of the original invaders were fascinated, and haunted, by a previous age. Map's portrayal of Herla indicates a realisation that his generation was sep-arated from the past by more than politics. When the king emerges from the cave as a figure from a former time, he presents the shepherd with a linguistic challenge which marks the temporal separation of the two men, even as it invites the discovery of their continued connection via a thread of shared linguistic tradition. Twelfth-century depictions and manipula-tions of Britain's vernacular language history allowed writers to position their work in relation to the insular past, and to explore how far that past could be retrieved through linguistic interpretation. The authorial strate-gies they employ range from comparatively subtle uses of archaic termi-nology to more direct considerations of language history in the form of etymologies and extended discussions. Most audaciously, some writers cre-ated new, ostensibly factual versions of the linguistic past through literary invention, portraying their works as translations from ancient source texts. Finally, Walter Map's anecdote is part of a small group of elaborate won-der stories which employ language to heighten a sense of the *unheimlich*. Responses to Britain's linguistic history were prompted as much by emo-tional and imaginative concerns as by analytical curiosity.

Whilst all the material discussed here can be considered as in some sense historical, it is situated at varying points on a continuum of fact and fic-tionality: explorations of language history are found throughout a diverse group of literary genres. The heterogeneity of medieval historiographical modes was made possible by drawing simultaneously on different standards of veracity. Instantiations of God's divine law provided a more important form of truth than empirically verifiable facts, rendering it acceptable to tailor any narrative in order to maximise its didactic potential. Ruth Morse has noted that 'it is this idea of the past as a *moral* example which constantly legitimated the embellishing or moulding of earlier accounts'.[3] Writers of history therefore did not hesitate to use all the rhetorical techniques at their disposal to convince their readers of their truthfulness: authority was as important as accuracy. Linguistic data could help to further these rhetor-ical aims. Alastair Minnis sees medieval assessments of textual authority as based on two criteria: conformity with Christian truth, and 'authenticity'.[4] Judgements concerning the authentic were highly subjective. It was desir-able that a text be the product of a named, and preferably well-known, ancient author; its age was also a significant factor in appraising its worth. William of Malmesbury evaluated differing exemplars of his sources by

comparing their antiquity.[5] Bernard of Chartres's deprecating comment that the writers of his age were merely the dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of the giants of the classical era was widely accepted as correct.[6] To be old was to be authoritative. Archaisms, etymologies, and depictions of crumbling sources provided an obvious means of demonstrating the age of a work or of constructing an impression of ancientness. They were able to heighten the value of the text as a witness to what was, or should have been, true.

The beneficial effect of references to language history on a text's authority did not necessarily end here. The worth of any given historical work was assessed on the basis of a hierarchy of sources. Eyewitness data were most highly prized; the later accounts of other historians were only of secondary importance.[7] Considerations of this hierarchy may have augmented the appeal of recourse to language history: in particular, etymology worked by extrapolating past events from contemporary linguistic data. As the relevant words could be selected on the basis of their availability to the intended audience, etymological exegesis could potentially transform every reader into a kind of eyewitness, building on his or her knowledge to establish the credibility of the author's narrative. Presentations of language history were also extremely flexible, both in the variety of discursive approaches that could be adopted, and in the many different impressions that could conceivably be given by the same linguistic data. Part of the attraction of archaic language lay in its ambiguity.

Moreover, despite a widely held belief in the allegorical nature of God's creation, twelfth-century historians were aware that not all natural or supernatural phenomena (such as the tale of Herla) could easily yield a didactic interpretation. Taking refuge in a modest view of the historian's role as a compiler of historical record, William of Newburgh stressed that he was a simple chronicler ('simplex [. . .] narrator'), rather than an expounder of the hidden future ('praesagus interpres').[8] Orderic Vitalis was equally subdued, protesting, 'I am not able to unravel the divine plan by which all things are made and cannot explain the hidden causes of things; I am merely engaged in writing historical annals' ('Diuinum examen quo cuncta fiunt discutere nescio, latentes rerum causas propalare nequeo; sed [. . .] annalem historiam simpliciter actito').[9] This acknowledgement that the decipherment of the divine order was not always possible allowed historical accounts of language to be shaped by factors beyond those contingent on divine truth. Yet whilst these accounts were not exclusively concerned with moral exemplarity, neither did they concentrate only on the reconstruction and verification of historical detail. Monika Otter has argued that

the episodes of archaeological discovery in the historical writing of twelfth-century England provided a locus for displays of 'self-conscious textuality' which explored the action of creating historiography.[10] Discussions of the history of Britain's vernacular languages exhibited a similar self-awareness, functioning not only as rhetorical devices to validate authorial aims and agendas, but also as a nexus for speculations about the past which did not necessarily have to be correct to be 'true'. They thus became a space for literary explorations of history, style, and identity.

The Languages of Britain

Twelfth-century writers were particularly sensitive to the linguistic past because of the depth and variety of Britain's multilingual cultures. Medieval interpretations of the island's languages saw them as witnesses to successive European invasions and continental contacts ranging from the Trojans to the Normans. Pre-Conquest eleventh-century Britain was already highly multilingual. In addition to English, Norse, and Latin, there were communities of differing Goidelic and Brittonic language speakers in Scotland, Cumbria, the Isle of Man, Wales, Cornwall, and some adjacent areas in the South and West of England. The Norman Conquest merely increased the extent of this insular polyglossia. It also continued a trend for ever closer cross-Channel ties. Late Anglo-Saxon England had significant diplomatic, economic, and linguistic connections to Normandy and the Low Countries. Emma of Normandy was queen of both Æthelred II and Cnut, and mother to Harthacnut and Edward the Confessor. Edward himself spent much of his youth in exile in Normandy, before returning to claim the throne in 1043.[11] Links to the continent extended beyond the court. The Domesday Book testifies to the presence of seventy-nine pre-Conquest individuals whose names potentially reflect some form of French ethnicity; a small contingent of urban property owners may have been in England for business reasons.[12] To a limited extent, the French language was hence already known in Anglo-Saxon England, and its presence was reflected by rare borrowings into Old English, such as *prūt* ('arrogant').[13]

Before 1066, English was already marked extensively by language contact resulting from conquest.[14] During the second half of the ninth century, large parts of England had been subdued and settled by Scandinavian invaders, leaving only Wessex, a small part of western Mercia, and an area of land in northern Northumbria under insular control.[15] An alliance of West Saxon and Mercian kings in the tenth century was able to recapture,

and to rule over, the whole of England, but from the 990s, Swein Fork-beard began to raid the kingdom once more: his son Cnut was crowned king of the entire country in 1017. Cnut's sons would only lose power in 1042, when Harthacnut died childless, leaving the throne to his maternal half-brother, Edward the Confessor. Eleventh-century England had thus already experienced one conquest, and a trilingual court which featured Norse, English, and Latin.[16] By 1066, communities of Norse speakers were receding northwards, but runic inscriptions survive which indicate the language's presence in North-West England as late as *c*.1100.[17] Scandinavian linguistic contact continued to exert an important influence on English well after the original settler communities had ceased to speak Norse. There seems to have been a degree of mutual comprehensibility between the two languages, although its exact extent remains highly debatable.[18] Scandinavian authors were aware that the languages had shared origins, even if their contemporary usage was divergent: the Icelandic author of the *First Grammatical Treatise* wrote of the English in the mid-twelfth century that 'we are of the same tongue, although there has been much change in one of them or some in both' ('vér erum einnar tungu, þó at gǫrzk hafi mjǫk ǫnnur tveggja eða nǫkkut báðar').[19] Comments like this suggest that there was a perceived similarity between Norse and English.[20] The large body of Old Norse loanwords in Middle English reveals that there was certainly extensive linguistic contact between the communities: these loanwords may originally have been adopted by the English as lexical variants to enlarge their native vocabulary.[21] The pervasive influence of Old Norse on English only becomes fully visible to us from the late twelfth century onwards, notably in the experiments with a language of regionally distinctive literary composition by the Lincolnshire priest Orrm, and in the South-West Midlands dialect of the Katherine Group and the *Ancrene Wisse*.[22] This lexical innovation is a reminder that if in some ways the Norman Conquest affected literary production in English, it also presented exciting opportunities for new vernacular borrowings, for literary experimentation, and for increased linguistic diversity.

When William I invaded, he brought with him a new set of linguistic practices which created a clear differentiation between his own reign and that of the previous Anglo-Saxon kings. Most strikingly, 1066 saw the widespread introduction of French to England. The leaders of William's army were mostly from a single area: nine of the eleven most powerful magnates recorded in the Domesday Book were all from the region of Lower Normandy, clustered around William's pre-Conquest ducal court

in Caen.[23] Their influence ensured that the prevalent insular form of the language was based on a northern form of the *langue d'oïl*.[24] By the first third of the twelfth century, this had begun to develop the orthographical features that we now associate with the dialect of Anglo-Norman, the French commonly spoken in England (although closely connected to wider continental networks).[25] Many of the Normans soon became bilingual, with the result that monoglot French speakers were worthy of comment in England by the end of the twelfth century.[26] Anglo-Norman continued to be used as a written insular language until the end of the Middle Ages and beyond; recent research indicates that as a spoken language learned in infancy, developments in its syntax mirrored those of continental French until the late fourteenth century.[27] William's followers also included smaller groups of Bretons and Flemings, whose cultural influence is still sometimes discernible in late-twelfth-century literature.[28] Although 1066 represented the most visible influx of foreigners, immigration from the continent continued throughout the twelfth century. The Normans also connected England to a shifting collection of territories which momentarily stretched as far as Toulouse in 1159 at the height of Henry II's power (well into the *langue d'oc*). The linguistic and political contacts they facilitated extended even further into the multilingual Norman principalities of southern Italy (first invaded in the early eleventh century) and Sicily (conquered between 1060 and 1091). During the twelfth century, francophone communities were found in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, France, the Low Countries, Italy, North Africa (briefly), Sicily, Malta, Cyprus, and the crusader states; forms of French were also employed across the continent as *linguae francae*. The court of Edward the Confessor had already been marked by its internationalism; the Norman Conquest expanded English cultural horizons yet further.

The bureaucratic practice of the new leadership had consequences that were subtle, but equally significant. The late Anglo-Saxon administration had employed Standard Old English for its official documentation: this is an orthographically regularised form of late West Saxon dialect which occurs ubiquitously in eleventh-century manuscripts, regardless of their location.[29] The Normans had initially continued to compose royal writs in Old English, but around 1070, this was replaced by Latin as the primary language of written administration.[30] Without the incentive to make English writing conform to a unified royal standard, new orthographies once again began to emerge. Standard Old English is likely to owe its genesis to a desire to demonstrate the united state of England under

King Edgar in the 970s.[31] By the time its widespread use declined a hundred years later, inevitably its written form did not reflect subsequent oral developments. Although some writers were able to demonstrate their continued mastery of classical Old English, many others increasingly chose to compose works in more contemporary forms of the language, characterised by a wide variety of dialectal features, a significant loss of inflectional endings, and a higher proportion of borrowings from Norse and French.[32] It has often been posited that the existence of the Old English vernacular corpus may have inspired the Normans to begin creating literature in their own language: late-eleventh- and twelfth-century England provides the first surviving evidence for a widespread movement of French literary composition.[33] Another potential consequence of engagement with Old English has been less discussed. The widespread circulation of material in an increasingly archaic form of the language heightened an awareness of linguistic change, drawing attention to the disparities between contemporary speech and the idiom of the pre-Conquest past.

Throughout the period, Latin remained the main language of the liturgy, the Bible, and scholarship. Aspects of its relationship with the vernaculars therefore recall the phenomenon known as extended diglossia, where different languages are assigned H(igh) and L(ow) prestige values, and are functionally compartmentalised for use in separate situations.[34] But this relationship should not be seen as a straightforward opposition or dichotomy between Latin (H) and vernaculars (L).[35] The perceived status of Britain's languages varied according to context: separately or in combination, Latinity and vernacularity offered fluid stylistic practices. Given Latin's foundational role in literacy, all other written vernaculars in twelfth-century Britain drew on its traditions of reading, writing, and interpretation to some extent. But whilst authors periodically stressed the internationalism and classical heritage of their writing, at other times, orality, localism and historical specificity were of greater interest: different stylistic practices in both Latin and the vernaculars could emphasise these characteristics to varying extents.[36] Whilst liturgical and classical Latin remained conceptually distinct from the vernacular languages of Britain in some areas, significant functional overlaps remained elsewhere. In some contexts, Latin authors made extensive use of lexis derived from the vernacular to accentuate the regional and temporal distinctiveness of their work. This was part of the wider interest in vernacularity which informed appeals to linguistic history. Precisely because they bore very obvious traces of their historical and geographical origins, vernacular languages often had great literary

potential to authenticate authorial claims. Their wide range of possible variants meant that linguistic data could be precisely situated in time and space. The mutable nature of the vernacular paradoxically heightened its value as convincing evidence of a text's history.

Scope of Volume

This book focusses on responses to the history of Britain's vernaculars written in English, French, and Latin; all the authorial perspectives examined here were connected to the Norman establishment in some way, whether through the Church or the court, or through their use of French. These perspectives have influenced the work's geographical range. Anglo-Norman writers on language history predominantly had contacts with regal and ecclesiastical centres of power across Normandy and southern England (amongst others, those connected to London, Caen, Canterbury, Oxford, St Albans, and Exeter are examined here). For them, swift sea travel ensured closer links between the continent and the South Coast than with northern or western Britain. They also had much fuller opportunities to acquire linguistic expertise in areas under Norman control. Their view of Britain therefore lingered on certain regions in much more detail than others, notably England, Wales, and Cornwall. Sometimes, the parameters of individual countries were imagined to encompass the whole island: 'Britain' was often used as a synonym for England or Wales, depending on the territorial loyalties and ambitions of authors.[37] Shaped by their interests, this book is largely concerned with the southern half of the island: it explores depictions of French, of English, and of the Welsh and Cornish employed to provide evidence of the ancient British language. Direct attention is not devoted to twelfth-century insular views of classical Latin in this volume. However, as part of its focus on the history of Britain's vernaculars, two aspects of Latin's legacy are explored in depth. Firstly, the entire work engages with the grammatical and etymological frameworks developed to study the languages of the ancient world: these underpinned every twelfth-century engagement with language history by the literate. Secondly, one chapter explores Norman perceptions of Latin legal and administrative registers which heavily feature vernacular loanwords. Another work remains to be written on Scottish, Irish, and Welsh perceptions of their own linguistic history.[38]

My strategy of selecting material based on the interests of medieval authors could have been extended further. Twelfth-century Britain was a porous, expansive polity, whose cultural and conceptual boundaries were

profoundly fluid. Geographically and politically, Norman rule encom-
passed a much broader range of connected territories than England, Wales,
and Cornwall. By the late twelfth century, the Angevin realm stretched
from Ireland via Normandy and Brittany to southern France. Even after
John's military defeats (notably the loss of Normandy in 1204), the king-
dom still retained significant territories amidst the *langue d'oc* communi-
ties in Gascony.[39] Linguistically, French and Latin linked the island to cos-
mopolitan intellectual and trading networks across Europe. Immigration to
Britain strengthened this internationalism: English, French, Norse, Gaelic,
Welsh, and Cornish were supplemented by smaller speech communities
such as Flemish, Breton, and Hebrew. The potential scope for linguis-
tic investigation was therefore vast, and took many directions. For exam-
ple, twelfth-century Anglo-Norman authors demonstrated some interest
in the languages of Scotland, part of Britain but never under Norman
rule,[40] and of Brittany, a client duchy of the Normans until 1166, when
it came under the direct control of Henry II.[41] The Bretons spoke a lan-
guage very similar to Cornish, and Brittany was understood to have been
populated originally by settlers from South-West Britain.[42] From 1169
onwards, the Normans began to lay the foundations for rule in Ireland,
opening a further field of potential linguistic enquiry.[43] The perceptions of
England, Wales, and Cornwall discussed here therefore present only one
part of the sensitivity to linguistic history shown by twelfth-century
authors.

The socio-economic framework of the Anglo-Norman source material
has led this study to concentrate on the languages of those under Nor-
man rule in Britain. However, the extant corpus of twelfth-century insu-
lar responses to language history has also influenced the parameters of the
enquiry in a second way: it primarily concerns the linguistic perceptions
of a very small, educated minority. Many aspects of linguistic history were
only visible to the fraction of the population that was Latin literate (roughly
6000 people in England at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086,
or 0.27/0.55 per cent), because comparisons between archaic and modern
usage were mostly rendered possible through exposure to historical texts.[44]
This portion of the population formed a linguistic and educational elite:
in the Middle Ages, to be called *litteratus* implied not merely an ability
to read, but also a knowledge of Latin letters.[45] As practically all the con-
ceptual tools for the academic study of language in medieval Britain had
arisen from the study of grammar and rhetoric in Latin, understandings
of language history were profoundly influenced by classical methods. At
the same time, the large amount of vernacular literature produced in the