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David Stifter

A Selection of Early Welsh Saga Poems. Edited by Jenny Rowland. [= Library of Medieval Welsh Literature], London: Modern Humanities Research Association 2014. xxxii + 112 pages. Hardback ISBN 978-1-907322-63-1. £21.99, $32.99, €27.50. Paperback ISBN 978-1-907322-75-4. £10.99, $17.50, €13.99

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Jennifer Rowland, long-time lecturer in Welsh in University College Dublin, has produced this selection of verse as a beginners' reader in Middle Welsh. The volume is (an unnumbered) part of the *Library of Medieval Welsh Literature* series whose aim it is to facilitate the teaching of Middle Welsh through the medium of English. Originally begun by the *University of Wales Press*, the series is now under the wings of the *Modern Humanities Research Association*, thereby imbuing the term 'modern' with a broader meaning than commonly understood. Like all volumes in the series, its very reasonable price makes its affordable for the targeted student audience. In the 'Introduction' (i–xxxii), Rowland cursorily discusses various literary aspects relevant to the understanding of the selected poems and cycles of poems: 'Prose-verse Composition', 'Interpretation', 'Nature Imagery, Gnomes, and Proverbs', 'Metrics', 'Manuscripts, Authorship, Dating, Language'. At the end, she sets out her principles 'On the Edition', together with 'A Note on Emendation'. Rowland takes a traditional view of the history of the poems. Even though she operates within the framework of written litera-ture when she discusses the possibility that certain archaic spellings of the archetypes had led later scribes to textual misunderstandings, Rowland tacitly implies that there was a period when the poems only existed in oral form (xxvii). Scholars that work in current paradigms will be more sceptical about such presuppositions.

What Rowland calls 'Prose-verse Composition' (xv–xviii) is more commonly known as prosimetrum, the combination of prose and poetry within a single literary text. A well-known representative of this style in Irish

literature is *Comrac Líadaine ocus Chuirithir* 'The Encounter of Líadain and Cuirithir' (CLC; Meyer 1902; Stifter 2003). Some of the issues emerging in the interpretation of the Middle Welsh compositions in the present volume are also relevant for understanding this Irish tale. I want to use the opportunity for a brief comparison between the texts from the two different traditions. The most palpable difference between the Welsh saga poems and CLC is that in the latter the poems are actually transmitted in a framework narrative, however brief the surrounding prose be, whereas there is no shred of evidence that a prose frame ever existed for the Middle Welsh poems. Obviously, there must have been a plot that would have provided the necessary background from which the Welsh poet drew the inspiration for his verses and against which he could expect the contemporary audience to be able to contextualise them. However, this plot, or, to use a potentially misleading term, the narrative setting, need not ever have possessed a fixed or prescriptive literary – written or oral – form. This specific background provides only the loose historical or pseudo-historical context that the poet bolstered up with universal narrative motifs, to create the compositions as they have come down to us, compositions that stand for themselves.

The matter is different with CLC. It has been suggested, or implied, that the poems in CLC predate the prose frame narrative (e.g., Meyer 1902: 8; Greene & O'Connor 1967: 72). This means that there would have been a time when the 'Cycle of Líadain and Cuirithir' only existed as a series of disjointed poems, similar to the Middle Welsh cycles edited by Rowland. However, such a notion does not hold up to an analysis of the language of CLC. A stanza in *Líadain's Lament* (Meyer 1902: 22–25; Greene & O'Connor 1967: 72–74), the most acclaimed and most unique piece of poetry in the tale, and for which one might therefore expect the best claim for antiquity, maybe even authorship by the shady historical person of Líadain herself, contains a rhyme which could have only come into being after phonetic developments in the 9th century, after the loss of independent vowel quality had already set in in absolute word-final position. I am thinking of the rhyme between *cena* 'beside him' : *dega* 'of fire', two words which up to the middle of the 8th century would have sounded *cenae* and *dego*. In addition to this, it can be demonstrated that poetry and prose were conceived as a literary unit. The author of the text employs lexical and phrasal parallelism not only between stanzas, but also between poetry and prose passages. From its frequent use in the tale, it is manifest that this parallelism is a deliberate stylistic device that unites the entire text. Other stanzas in CLC contain deliberate lapses into a form of the language which shows clear traits of Middle Irish. There can be thus no argument that the individual poems were written at different times, and no argument that the prose was written at a different time from the poetry. The entire text of *Comrac Líadaine ocus Chuirithir* appears to be a single fictional product of

the 9th century. There is a lesson to be learned here for other poetic cycles with ancient authorial ascriptions.

To return to Rowland's reader of Middle Welsh saga poems, the 'Texts' occupy the first twenty pages and comprise around two dozen poems of diverse length. The selected poems come from the so-called cycle of *Llywarch Hen*, from *Canu Heledd*, and *Llym Awel*. Since the book is aimed specifically at students of Middle Welsh at a beginners' level, it is not intended as a full scholarly edition (xxix). In practical terms this means that textual variants are only indicated when they would entail significant differences in meaning. The Middle Welsh texts are not accompanied by a translation because a relatively recent English translation, namely the author's own in Rowland 1990, is readily available. This lack of a translation is partially compensated by the extensive 'Notes' (21–74), but the impression from my own perusal of the book is that not all questions, which might arise for someone with a basic working knowledge of Middle Welsh, are being addressed or answered there. A translation would have provided a guiding hand as to how to understand certain difficult or ambiguous lines. Rowland has chosen saga poems for the reader because contentwise they are comparatively straightforward. Still, it is in the nature of poetry that its concise, syntactically reduced style, no matter how narrational it may be, will produce obscure passages on occasion, and the texts chosen in this book are not different in this respect. The Glossary is not always helpful either, for example where idiomatic uses of prepositions are concerned. These typically differ from one language to the other; guidance for learners would be particularly welcome in this area.

That the book has grown from the author's classroom experience in University College Dublin is noticeable from the fact that the notes are sometimes rather conversational in style. They contain references to grammar, occasionally without a discernible indication what the author has in mind. All of this renders the book not a stand-alone publication, but the parallel use of, for instance, Daniel Simon Evans' *Grammar of Middle Welsh*, Rowland 1990 and, occasionally, *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* is necessary.

The alphabetic arrangement of the 'Glossary' (75–112) is bizarre. By this, I do not mean the fact that the headwords follow the Modern Welsh order, even though they appear in the Middle or Old Welsh spelling as they are found in the manuscripts. While this in itself will hardly improve the book's usability for beginners, and leads to somewhat confusing sequences of headwords, this order is something beginners have to learn when they embark on the study of medieval Welsh. What is bizarre, though, are the headings for the subsections of the glossary. Instead of having one for each letter of the (Welsh) alphabet – with due allowance for the extensive allography of medieval Welsh orthographical practice –, a subsection usually

encompasses two letters, at least in the heading. However, the heading of the subsection does not always correspond to its actual content. While the section entitled "ch, d" (88–91) does indeed contain all words starting with these letters (but why not add the 5 words with *ch-* to the preceding section for "c" (83–88)?), the following one is entitled "e, f, ff" (91–93) but only has words starting with *e-*. This is duly followed by section "f, ff" (93–94). A similar inconsistency occurs with "r(h), s" (107–108) which has only words with *r-*. Words with *s-* are contained in section "s, t" (108–110).

Some parts of the book display a lack of thorough proofreading. To give just a few examples, in the notes to *Marwnad Gwên* I encountered "between in end" for 'between the end' (30), "repetition the definite article" for 'repetition of the definite article' and "pronon" for 'pronoun' (31).

Notwithstanding these pedantic remarks, in conclusion my overall impression is that this is a useful and useable reader of Middle Welsh poetry, a reader, however, that I believe nevertheless requires guidance by an experienced teacher in the case of absolute beginners. This comparatively slim volume will probably cover a semester's reading class in Middle Welsh.

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