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Old Norse-Icelandic female characters and their roles are varied and multi-dimensional — conditioned not only by their gender but by other variables including age, social and economic status, race, physical attributes, and so forth? Are women poets distinct from other female characters in any way? These are only a few of the questions this volume prompts, and it seems that Straubhaar would have been expertly placed to pick up where Guðrún Helgadóttir left off and offer some comment on the themes found in the poetry, and perhaps the idea of women's subjectivity more widely, but readers are left to draw their own conclusions on that subject.

This volume is intended 'to give voice to [*Laxdæla saga's* Bróka-]Auðr and her sisters ... whose exploits, poetic and otherwise, were considered memorable enough to record in the Middle Ages' (p. vii). Straubhaar certainly succeeds in her admirable goal, and the book's inclusion in the Library of Medieval Women series, and its accessibility, will hopefully draw the general medievalist's attention to this remarkable poetry. Norse specialists will continue to use the more philological *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* editions and their commentaries as their primary sources, but they will also benefit from reading the verses in a different context, with poems from different genres, composed and uttered by women of all kinds of backgrounds, side by side.

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Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Oldest British Prose Literature: The Compilation of the Four Branches of the 'Mabinogi'*. Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009. viii + 570pp. ISBN 978 0 7734 4710 3. £99.99 to libraries, £39.50 (inc. p.& p.) to individuals

Count Tolstoy, kinsman of the great novelist, has long been a conspicuously brave and principled figure in English public life. With his study of these famous tales from the *Mabinogion* he again enters the arena, and with some success. The volume, given the Adèle Mellen Prize by its publishers, also won a Welsh Book of the Year award for 2010, and comes with a foreword by Nicolas Jacobs of Jesus College, Oxford. Readers will hence ask if the book's controversial arguments deserve such recognition and have permanent importance. As this is especially so for non-specialists unwilling to enter the cross-fire of Celtic Studies, we shall sum up what the book tells us, and then say if we agree.

*The Oldest British Prose Literature* has two qualities that compel respect. It is the most ambitious attempt ever made to provide definitive answers for the date and origins of these four classic tales of love, magic, and adventure. It is also scrupulously fair in citing critics with whom Count Tolstoy disagrees. It has eight chapters, full bibliography, and selective index.

We start with questions of composition and structure, and the significance of 'four branches'. Then we go on to the problem of date, where linguistic and historical factors are to the fore. Chapter three looks in detail at the second tale, of Branwen. It says much on historical aspects of the 'Crown of London' with which Branwen's brother Bendigeidfran is invested, and on the more nebulous subject of Bendigeidfran or Brân as pre-Christian psychopomp, who (like Egyptian or Greek equivalents) guides mortals over the waters of death. Chapter four continues analysis of the tale of Branwen and its Irish elements. Special attention is

given to identifications, both of the river (Liffey or Shannon?) that blocks the path of Welsh invaders who have come to liberate Branwen, and of possible links between Britain's King Brân and Ireland's King Brian Ború (d. 1014), hero of the Battle of Clontarf. The latter theme is taken further in chapter five, which seeks parallels between the narrative as we have it and Irish history in the Viking Age. Chapter six moves to the third tale, that of Manawydan, which has been the least regarded of the four, but where Count Tolstoy sees references to the oppressions of King Knútr or Canute and the hostility of Anglo-Scandinavians to the Welsh. Thereafter is an account of history and heroic literature. The eighth and last chapter sums up views on the author of the tales, taken as an eleventh-century Dyfed man. Here Count Tolstoy is in flat opposition to this reviewer, whose *The Origins of the 'Four Branches of the Mabinogi'* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2009) argues that the author was a twelfth-century Gwynedd woman. Clearly, two such different views cannot co-exist. Before long, one must gain the ascendancy. *The Oldest British Prose Literature* thus presents ample opportunity for disagreement and debate. Like Shakespeare's sonnets, the *Four Branches* provoke bewildering disunity and disaccord amongst critics. As such the study merits praise. Not only does its detailed, learned, and almost exhaustive study of the problems command attention, but it has the virtue (essential to freedom) of challenging orthodoxies and obliging anyone ready to listen to think again. For this it deserves its readers.

Now for special points. The author claims (p. 109) that the concept of London as Britain's royal capital long predates the *Four Branches* and Geoffrey of Monmouth. This is dubious. London does not figure at all in such early Welsh sources as *Historia Brittonum* and the Harleian *Annales Cambriae*. No king was crowned there until 1042, when the Confessor came to the throne. Harold, the Conqueror, William Rufus, and Henry I all imitated him. The 'Crown of London' in the *Four Branches* is thus hardly an old expression, since it cannot predate 1042. After London, Oxford. The author describes the episode in the third branch where the hero Pryderi goes there to render homage to the usurper Caswallon (p. 123), as 'brief', 'incongruous', and unaccountable. We disagree, as it supplies artistic and political closure for the Armageddon of the second branch. It in any case accords with dating of the *Four Branches* to the 1120s or slightly later, because Oxford had no political significance before then. In 1086 much of it was derelict, as Domesday shows. Only in the 1120s, when Henry I came to Woodstock, built Beaumont Palace (north of Gloucester Green), and began issuing charters, did Oxford become a centre of royal power, explaining why the author of the *Four Branches* then (in our view) saw it as a place for attendance upon a British ruler.

Other points concern logic rather than knowledge. The narrator's intimate familiarity with Gwynedd landscape causes problems for Count Tolstoy, who sees him as a Dyfed man, which leads to the comment (p. 209 n. 109, and cf. p. 468) 'there is no reason why a South Walian author should not have repeated local lore from Gwynedd of which he possessed no direct knowledge'. This is to multiply epicycles. Why, then, do the tales say so much of Gwynedd and Dyfed, including their political advancement (where the narrator shows extreme tact when the two go to war), and almost nothing of Powys, Glamorgan, or Gwent? This reviewer has an explanation: that the author belonged to the royal house of Gwynedd, but married into that of Dyfed. Hence the familiarity with the geography of both regions and concern for territorial advancement (at the expense of other Welsh realms). It is submitted that this case has cogency, as others do not. It means that we simply disagree with the further claim (p. 225) that the author 'possessed little direct knowledge of the northern kingdom', when the text points rather to profound acquaintance with Gwynedd. There is an error on *Cogwy* (p. 252),

which was not the Welsh name for the battle of the Winwaed (near Doncaster) or *Campus Gai* in 655, but that of Maserfelth in 642. As for the dating of the tale of Pwyll to about 1018 (p. 471), this faces grave linguistic objections, especially in its use of borrowings from French, such as *pali* ‘brocaded silk’. Anglicists know that French loans in English are rare until as late as the 1130s, the evidence being set out in Alistair Campbell’s *Old English Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 221. Why should we find French loans in eleventh-century Welsh, when they are virtually absent from eleventh-century English?

Nevertheless, anything that prompts interest in the *Four Branches* is to be commended. For that alone, *The Oldest British Prose Literature* thoroughly deserves its prize from the Welsh Arts Council. It is already attracting comment from professional scholars, as in Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (reviewed below). In short, Count Tolstoy is to be congratulated on having assembled a mass of material for consideration and debate.

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Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xii + 425pp. ISBN 978 0 19 958865 7. £65.00

More than thirty years have gone into the making of this book, which has twelve chapters. They discuss Irish influence on the earliest Welsh texts; terms for the Other World; the ‘Slavic antithesis’ narrative technique (with ‘Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it’s Superman!’ as a modern epigone); the riddling ‘watchman device’ on mysterious oncomers; and Irish elements in *Culhwch and Olwen*. There follow four studies on the *Mabinogi* tale of Branwen. They deal with its presentation of Ireland’s geography; Irish royal submission and Henry II; Irish giants; and accounts of a death-trap Iron House, assassins hidden in bags, and the benign severed head. We end with three analyses of Welsh tradition and its supposed allusions to Cú Chulainn, Finn mac Cumhaill and Deirdre, and Irish literary criticism. Much of this material has appeared in books and journals from the 1970s onwards, and its author now brings it together as he approaches retirement.

After nearly four decades in academia, this reviewer has never read a monograph more ambitious in its learning than this. The footnotes are copious. Sometimes they fill more than half a page. The actual text ends on p. 339, with pp. 340–425 (a fifth of the book) devoted to an admirable bibliography and index. In word-count, the references equal what they refer to. Nor has this reviewer found one misprint or misquotation in a volume that embodies a lifetime’s research on Celtic Studies. Normally, one might then welcome it as the definitive statement on matters discussed in Cecile O’Rahilly’s *Ireland and Wales* (London: Longman, 1924) or Proinsias Mac Cana’s *Branwen, Daughter of Llŷr* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958). This would be especially so, given its sober verdict (p. 339) that scholars have exaggerated Irish influence on Welsh literature, ‘but neither was it negligible’.

Nevertheless, this imposing volume will be controversial. The main reason for that is tucked away at p. 19 n. 105, in the terse comment ‘here may be mentioned the theory that Gruffudd [ap Cynan]’s daughter Gwenllïan [d. 1136] composed *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*’, citing this reviewer’s *The Origins of the ‘Four Branches of the Mabinogi’* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2009). Professor Sims-Williams’s judgement is, alas, less than his