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The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun (2016), by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Verlyn Flieger

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The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun, together with The Corrigan Poems, by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Verlyn Flieger, with a Note on the Text by Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 2016. xxii, 106 pp. £16.99 (hardcover) 9780008202132. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017. \$24.00 (hardcover) 9781328834546. [Also available in ebook formats.]

The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun, first published in 1945 in *The Welsh Review*, has been largely ignored by the reading public—not exactly because it has been, as *The Guardian* (14 July 2016) somewhat erroneously claimed, “out of print ever since,” suggesting ‘inaccessibility’,¹ but rather because its setting is Brittany and not Middle-earth. Consequently, it did not become better known even when the growth of the internet provided easy access to almost all of Tolkien’s works—although not always in an authoritative form. So for decades *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* continued to lead a shadowy existence, not unlike many of Tolkien’s other non-Middle-earth poems, and was known only to a small circle of scholars and aficionados.

The scholarly publications discussing the poem have been few and far between. Jessica Yates, in her pioneering essay on the poem back in 1991, correctly identified the sources (and analogues) for Tolkien’s text. Furthermore, Tom Shippey mentions it briefly in his magisterial *The Road to Middle-Earth* (p. 280) and his *J.R.R. Tolkien. Author of the Century* (pp. 293-294), Jane Chance discusses it in connection with the problem of pride in her *Tolkien’s Art* (pp. 120-125), and more recently and more thoroughly, Rafael Pascual and Eduardo Segura (2011) as well as Kristine Larsen (2014) discuss the poem and its position within Tolkien’s oeuvre in their papers. Douglas A. Anderson, ever a treasure-trove of information and knowledge, pointed out to me and gave me access to a rare (only 500 copies printed) bilingual Serbian-English edition of the poem (cf. <http://lingwe.blogspot.ch/2015/08/a-standalone-edition-of-lay-of-aotrou.html>). It was first published 2002, and has been republished more recently in 2015. In addition to the text of the lay, which is taken from *The Welsh Review*, it also contains an essay (in English) by Elizabeth Currie, lengthy but uneven in its usefulness and quality, on the lay’s cultural and historical background (“The Lay of Man and the Supernatural”). Of all those publications dealing with *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun*, Flieger’s edition mentions or lists (in the short bibliography) Tom Shippey’s *Road to Middle-earth*, his festschrift *Tolkien in the New Century* (where Larsen’s paper was published), and, of course, Jessica Yates’ seminal study. It would have been nice if the new edition of the text had provided an

¹ If you are lucky and have access to a decent university library, a simple interlibrary loan will make sure that you receive a copy of the original text. Most of the (potential) readers of the volume, however, don’t have this opportunity, so *The Guardian*’s statement does have some truth to it.

overview of the few scholarly publications on the poem. This would have been all the more desirable since some of those are either very difficult to get hold of (Mikić's edition), or have been published outside the American mainstream media (Pascual and Segura, and even Yates) and their accessibility is (for the layperson) somewhat limited. Furthermore, future scholarship is likely to take Flieger's edition as its basis, and could profit greatly from a commented overview of these few but often insightful studies. But let me turn to the central task of any critical text edition: the presentation of the text itself.

Part One contains the core piece of the edition, which is the reprint of the text as it appeared in the December 1945 issue of *The Welsh Review*. Flieger adds a few footnotes explaining "hard words" and four-and-a-half pages of "Notes and Commentaries," providing explanations for and background information on elements such as the forest of Broceliande or the white doe. The poem is preceded and prepared by two short texts. First, a "Note on the Text" by Christopher Tolkien (two-and-one-third pages) who connects the writing of the lay in 1930 with Tolkien's work on "The Lay of Leithian" and briefly comments on the external and internal sources. Second, Verlyn Flieger in her four-and-a-half page "Introduction" puts the poem into the context of Tolkien's other non-Middle-earth fiction and pays special attention to the motif of the (dangerously) seductive elf-maiden. Flieger also discusses Tolkien's source text as found in Vilmarqué's *Barzaz-Breiz: Chants Populaire de la Bretagne* (first published 1839) and puts Vilmarqué's literary and editorial activities into the context of the 19th century folklore movement (Grimm, Lönnrot etc.).

Part Two of the edition consists of a commented presentation of Tolkien's two previously unpublished "Corrigan" poems (referred to as "Corrigan I" and "Corrigan II"). Although it has not been possible to establish the exact date of composition of these poems, it is very likely that they immediately preceded the composition of *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* (1930). While "Corrigan I" describes a mother's (in the end successful) endeavours to get back her baby boy, who had been stolen by the fairies and replaced by a hideous changeling, "Corrigan II" provides a shorter version of the plot as found in *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun*. The close relationship between the shorter poem and the longer lay is also evidenced by the fact that Tolkien recycled lines from "Corrigan II" in his lay.

Part Three presents the texts of a fragment, of a fairy copy manuscript, and of the typescript (with corrections) that provided the blueprint for the published text. While the fragment and the fair copy manuscript are given in full length, we have only a selective and partial discussion of the changes made to the typescript.

The final section, Part Four, comprises of a short selection of comparative verses in English, Breton, and French and illustrate the parallels as well as the differences between Tolkien and his sources and analogues.

What, then, are we to make of this edition? First, Verlyn Flieger must be thanked for making a largely forgotten work once more available to a wider public—and hopefully to a new generation of Tolkien scholars. Thanks to her we have now once more easy access to a bona fide text of the poem. Furthermore, the inclusion of the formerly unpublished “Corrigan” poems provides a fascinating insight into Tolkien’s continued and varied engagement with the Dangerous Realm. And last, the reproduction of selected pages from both manuscripts and typescript (with Tolkien’s handwritten corrections) gives the reader a good idea of what a Tolkien manuscript/typescript looks like. This is all the more important as only very few readers have ever had the chance to gain a first-hand impression of how the Professor’s texts look like by consulting his manuscripts deposited at the Bodleian Library.

There are, however, also some points that are somewhat problematic and must be addressed by a reviewer. To start, I would like to comment on the way the additional drafts and the changes to the typescript are presented. Reproducing the fair manuscript copy in full, for example, is a laudable enterprise, yet the real editorial work would have begun with a critical edition of the typescript, and Tolkien’s numerous and seemingly far-reaching changes and corrections to it. I am aware that HarperCollins would not have been enthusiastic about a purely scholarly philological edition of the text with a critical apparatus—not least since very few readers will know what a critical apparatus is and how it works. However, the volume has only 128 pages and there would have been plenty of space for a critical edition of the typescript, giving us all the changes and corrections in a critical apparatus. This would have provided the basis for further scholarly work along the lines given by Flieger herself in her exemplary analysis of some of the changes. However, to adapt Shakespeare’s words, the volume, as it is, provokes the scholarly desire for further research into the final stages of the text’s development, but takes away (or at least does not make possible) the performance since we lack the necessary data base.

This does not invalidate the volume’s value for the general reader and as a starting point for further research, and it rightly deserves a place next to the other volumes in the “series,” yet it still leaves much of the scholarly work to be done.

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