



Petrovskaia, N. I.: *This is not a Grail Romance. Understanding Historia Peredur vab Efracw. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 2023. 228 pp. ISBN 9781837720361. Price: €24.99.*

The anonymous Middle Welsh tale commonly referred to for convenience as *Peredur* has been the subject of scholarly attention ever since it first came to the attention of the wider world through the English translation by Lady Charlotte Guest, first published in 1839.<sup>1</sup> It raises a wide range of questions, not least because of the nature of the manuscript tradition. Two long narratives are preserved in Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch (the White Book of Rhydderch), now Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 4–5 (c. 1350), and in Llyfr Coch Hergest (the Red Book of Hergest), Oxford, Jesus College, MS 111 (1382x1405), and in the past the common assumption that these represented a ‘complete’ or ‘standard’ version of the tale tended to distort and oversimplify critical perceptions, consequently neglecting the importance of the two earliest, albeit fragmentary, witnesses, preserved in National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 7 (c. 1300) and Peniarth MS 14ii (first half of the fourteenth century). The standard modern edition, by Glenys Witchard Goetinck, reinforced this view, for it was based on the White Book version and although it included in appendix the texts of the two fragments, these were not editions but raw transcripts lifted from J. Gwenogvryn Evans’s diplomatic edition of tales from Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch. (Evans 1976)

The four manuscript witnesses raise fundamental questions about the text’s origins and evolution. They were copied in different parts of Wales — the two fragments from the north, Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch from Ceredigion and Llyfr Coch Hergest from Glamorgan — and none is a copy of another; moreover, the two fragments present significant differences to the two later, longer versions. The problem is complicated by the overlaps in some sections between the Welsh narrative — or perhaps narrative(s) — and the late twelfth-century Old French *Roman de Perceval* or *Conte du Graal* by Chrétien de Troyes. The nature of this relationship dominated research on *Peredur* until the 1970s, when at last critics began to consider *Peredur* in all its guises as a literary work in its own right, rather than simply as a pawn in the often-heated debate about origins of the Arthurian legend in general and of the grail in particular. The inclusion in *Peredur* of a procession similar to that found in the French romance, but featuring a severed head rather than some kind of vessel, only heightened arguments about origins

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1 It was published as the second part of her best-selling and influential collection, *The Mabinogion, from the Llyfr Coch o Hergest and Other Ancient Welsh Manuscripts* (Guest 1838–1849) (3 vols, London: Longmans, & Llandoverly: William Rees, 1838–1849).

and influences. The slightly provocative title of this book nods towards those stale debates but also nails the author's colours firmly to the mast.

Although articles on *Peredur* abound, apart from one ground-breaking collection of essays, Davies and Thomas's *Canhwyll Marchogyon: Cyd-destunoli Peredur*, the only book-length study by a single author hitherto has been Glenys Goetinck's *Peredur: A Study of Welsh Tradition in the Grail Legend*, published some fifty years ago, and this was concerned primarily with the contemporary fashion for seeking reflections of the Sovereignty myth in Middle Welsh texts (Davies and Thomas 2000; Goetinck 1975). This new work by Natalia I. Petrovskaia, focusing firmly on the texts as we have them, is therefore most welcome.

The volume comprises six chapters, each focusing on one aspect of *Peredur*. The first gets to grips with the question of the narrative structure of the two distinct versions, the short one, represented by the acephalous Peniarth 7 text, which concludes at the end of the Angharad Llaw Eurog sequence, and the Longer Version preserved in the White Book and Red Book. Much has been written on this topic, because the paratactic nature of these narratives, built up as they are with blocks or sequences of more or less discrete episodes, does not necessarily fit with modern critics' expectations of how a tale should be constructed, particularly when its relation to Chrétien's *Conte du Graal* has overshadowed readings of the Welsh narrative(s). It is pleasing, therefore, to find a fresh approach here. Petrovskaia argues that 'we should not read even the Short Version ... as a single continuous narrative', but rather that we should regard both versions as a compilation of episodes, each with its own internal consistency, a 'loose collection' comparable, perhaps, to the Welsh cycle of Charlemagne tales (p. 18). She also develops further, earlier scholars' arguments on the importance of triadic patterns in the narrative construction, which she describes intriguingly as a series of fractals.

There follows an exploration of the possible geographical setting of various episodes, informed by a consideration of medieval material culture as well as relevant historical context. It does not, however, address the important question of whether the geography might have different resonances for audiences in different parts of Wales and in different periods. Given the provenance of the manuscripts and the length of time between the copying of the earliest and the latest, perceptions and indeed identifications even in the loosest sense might well be variable.

The possible historical context is considered further in the next chapter, focusing on the identity of the empress of *Corsdinobyl* (Peniarth MS 7) or *Cristinobyl* (White Book and Red Book versions), revisiting the arguments which Petrovskaia previously aired in her monograph *Medieval Welsh Perceptions of the Orient* (2015). Although this new discussion is more nuanced, broadening the focus from the empress Matilda to embrace other possibilities, one or two weaknesses in the detail remain. The treatment of possible scribal corruption

to account for the variant forms of the place name is superficial, with vague references to ‘some’ — unspecified — ‘insular scripts’ (p. 88), and not entirely convincing given evidence in surviving manuscripts of Welsh scribal practices of abbreviation. The reference to the form *Corstinobyl* being attested in the fifteenth century in MS Peniarth 50 and in a poem by Ieuan ap Huw Cae Llwyd is described simply as ‘problematic’ as evidence, but no mention is made of the possibility, if not probability, that these instances derive from knowledge of a form of *Peredur* itself — not unlikely given the provenance of Peniarth 50 and Ieuan’s known networks.

An exploration of the literary context teases out the possible narrative associations of some details or episodes with ‘lost tales’. *Cyfeiriadaeth* is a feature of both poetry and prose in Middle Welsh, where the modern reader may not infrequently be faced with passing references to narratives not otherwise preserved. Important examples discussed here are *y marchawc a ranassei yr aualeu yn llys Arthur* (‘the knight who shared out the apples in Arthur’s court’) and the severed head that is carried in the procession through the hall of the castle that corresponds to that of the grail procession in French romance. Petrovskaja wisely avoids making any firm connections with material preserved elsewhere, but instead stresses the resonances that such references might have for a medieval audience, calling to mind related traditions.

Knowledge of Welsh Laws often underpins narratives in Middle Welsh tales, often conditioning characters’ speech or behaviour in given situations. Here this understanding is used to inform discussion of, for example, Peredur not asking questions about the procession he has witnessed at his uncle’s castle, and the incident where he encounters his foster sister with her husband’s corpse. As the author shows, this deeply embedded feature of Welsh narrative can create sharp contrast with knightly *mores* of the francophone romance tradition. Hand in hand with the variation between the various witnesses of *Peredur*, this relationship between the tale and the Laws has obvious implications for discussion of the relationship between the Welsh narratives and Chrétien’s romance.

The final chapter returns to consideration of female characters, especially the matter of female power and land ownership — features which, once again, relate to legal conventions and historical contexts. Here, however, the discussion relates more to the role or otherwise of the supernatural or magic, including (possible) giants and the witches of Caer Loyw. Once again Petrovskaja is careful to set these figures within a wide literary context, beyond as well as within Welsh tradition.

Throughout the volume, Petrovskaja builds on, extends and refines previous work on *Peredur*, including her own. In some ways, the book reads as a series of essays rather than as a seamless garment of a monograph, but a brief conclusion draws all the threads neatly together. The arguments are set out carefully and clearly, though I would cavil at a number of details. For example, the discussion on p. 29 is based on an incorrect translation of *delis* (maintained [a friendship]) as

‘renewed’. Again, arguing even tentatively, that *caer uoel*, (a fort or castle without towers), may imply ‘a religious habitation’ (p. 57), since the primary meaning of *moel* is ‘bald’ or ‘tonsured’ seems farfetched. *Caer* is by definition a fortified, defensive structure and *moel* is a common descriptor of buildings: in my own north-western dialect, for example, *tŷ moel* means a house without any associated agricultural land. Despite some questionable contentions in the detail, however, *This is not a Grail Romance* represents an important advance in our understanding of *Peredur*, its evolution and its historical contexts.

## List of References

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