

How Culhwch Won Olwen

SAMPLE

Also by Liam Guilar

Rough Spun to Close Weave
I'll Howl Before You Bury Me

Anhaga

Lady Godiva and Me

A Presentment of Englishry

A Man of Heart

The Fabled Third

SAMPLE

How Culhwch Won Olwen

(A verse translation of the oldest Arthurian story)

translated from Welsh by

Liam Guilar

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(*this address not for correspondence*)

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Lightning Source France,
1 Av. Johannes Gutenberg, 78310 Maurepas, France
Email: compliance@lightningsource.fr

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(i.m Michael Alexander, with thanks)

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To the reader

Culhwch and Olwen (*Culhwch ac Olwen*) is a prose tale, written in medieval Welsh, which survives in two manuscripts from the 14th century. The story, in its current version, probably dates from the 11th, though some parts may be much older. It is one of the eleven stories collected in *The Mabinogion*. When Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones translated the collection, they placed *Culhwch and Olwen* in a group they called 'The Four Independent Native Tales'. The 'oldest surviving Arthurian tale', it is unlike any of the other stories in the collection and I think it is one of the great literary performances. Whoever put the surviving version together was a genius; a wayward or accidental genius, but a genius.

By modern literary standards it is chaotic and unsure of its genre. It is episodic, inconsistent and contradicts itself. There are conversations which read as though parts have been lost or misunderstood, and episodes in which the sequence of events seems to be scrambled. But if one accepts the story is the way it is because its audience liked it that way, then it is a reminder that 'modern literary standards' are not the only way of approaching a text, and any attempt to cling to them will ruin your enjoyment of what follows. It has the logic of dreams and the morality of nightmare.

The translation is based on *Culhwch and Olwen. An edition and study of the oldest Arthurian tale*, by Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans, (University of Wales Press, 1992.)

My thanks to Dr. Aled Llion Jones who generously made a recording of some of the names so I could check my pronunciation. Sections of the translation have appeared in *The High Window*, *The Brazen Head*, and *Long Poem Magazine*. My thanks to the editors.

If you do not speak or read Welsh, don't be intimidated by the spelling of the names of people, places, horses, dogs and wild pigs. Throw away your inhibitions, do the best you can with the pronunciation, and keep reading.

PROCESS

I translated into prose and checked my translation first against Gwyn Jones and 'Thomas Jones', and then against Sioned Davies's, Patrick K. Ford's, and Will Parker's online annotated translation. It is reassuring to discover that parts of the story remain baffling in all five versions.

Then I turned the prose into verse. Although it survives in print, the story has its roots in a half-glimpsed tradition of oral performance. My aim is to mimic a voice telling a story. For this reason, I didn't think using formal verse forms, Welsh or English, would be appropriate. The episodic nature of the text, and the variation in treatment and style from episode to episode suggested a verse sequence rather than a single narrative poem.

I set myself guidelines which I kept to where possible:

1) My Model Reader does not read medieval Welsh and doesn't know modern Welsh either. On the other hand, my Model Reader is not daunted by the challenge of pronouncing over five hundred Welsh names.

2) Leave nothing out. While writing *The Fabled Third*, I translated stories from *The Mabinogion* and then rewrote versions of them. I cut, condensed, or summarised and was free to alter the narrative. I didn't want to do any of that with Culhwch. Intrigued by the problem of deciding what was 'relevant', I left nothing out. The exception to this is the Court List, where I have not included all the names.

3) Keep as close to the Welsh as possible. This set up a powerful tension between some of the text's characteristics and what passes for acceptable in modern English. I realised early on that this would make writing difficult and might make the verse clumsy. But I stuck to the intention while cursing my earlier decision.

4) Where things aren't clear in the original, and they aren't in any other translation, do not tidy them. The story *is* contradictory and inconsistent. To describe a narrative as 'dreamlike' is perhaps unhelpful, but the world of Culhwch's quest is not one that can be rationalised and that is one of its attractions.

5) Add nothing. A modern adapter might want to add scenes: Olwen with her father; Bedwyr and Kei grumbling over the pretty boy they've been saddled with; the wedding night, the newlyweds going to bed with her father's head on a pole visible through the window; the local giant's convention complaining about the death rate amongst its members. But one of the strengths of the story is its invitation to its readers to use their imaginations to fill in these gaps. The major exception to this rule is that I incorporated material from the Triads into the Court List and Ysbaddaden's list of tasks.

6) Avoid putting commentary or criticism into the translation itself. This is a deliberately 'unscholarly' production. In the final version I have used more footnotes than I intended. Anyone interested in the literary, linguistic and historical debates surrounding the story and the problems of translation will find them summarised in the major modern English versions of *The Mabinogion* or in detail in Bromwich and Evans' edition of the text.

Translating *Culhwch ac Olwen*

In popular films,
the sexy treasure hunter/archaeologist,
(they conflate the two,
much to my trowel-wielding friends' dismay)
who's fluent in every lost, forgotten, ancient, language,
confronting the inscription on the recently uncovered wall,
or gazing at the long lost rediscovered legendary text,
looks, then translates, without a pause,
into a fluent, idiomatic, streetwise American.

The reality is more like this:

*Kilyd son of Kyledon Wledic
wanted a wife as noble as himself.
Here is the woman he wanted;
Goleudyt daughter of Anlawd Wledic*

So far so good.

After they stayed together What? *Gwest*. Ah, see note.
They spent the night together. Is that too direct?
The verb is related to the one for copulation.
They came together. After they were married.
...bland. After they had slept together.
No, the storyteller could have used *kysgu gan*.
The cruder options? No. Not here. What follows?

*The country went to pray they ?might have? offspring.
And they got a child/boy through the prayers of the country.
And from the hour she captured, caught?*
The next word's definitely 'pregnant'. Another note.
'Became pregnant' though literally 'caught pregnancy'.

As though it were an illness,
perhaps better than 'fell pregnant'
which evokes abrupt decline, or woman, falling?
Then she went wild/feral. Another note.
'She went mad'. Mad or wild is somewhere you go to,
in this case beyond the civilised boundaries.
She's gone mad and won't come near a building.
Wouldn't enter a building?

*And from the time that she was pregnant,
she went wild and wouldn't enter any building.
And when her time came, she came to her good sense.*
You go mad but *come* to your senses. The payoffs here,
the sudden twist estranging your own language.
You go out of your mind as though it were a car,
and you could leave it in the car park to return to
when finished being mad and needed it again. Anyway,
what's next? Pigs!? What? We're up to line 7, only
one thousand two hundred and thirty-eight to go.

SAMPLER

Part 1

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Culhwch is born¹

Kilyd mab Kyledon Wledic
wanted a wife as noble as himself.
The woman he wanted was Goleudyt,
the daughter of Anlawd Wledic.

After they came together,
the people prayed
they would be blessed with children
and they got a boy
through the prayers of the country.

From the moment she was pregnant,
she was wild and wouldn't enter any building.
When her time came, she came to her senses,
where a swineherd kept a herd of pigs.
Scared by the swine the queen gave birth.
The swineherd took the baby to the court.

The boy was baptised and called Culhwch
because he was found in a pig run.
However, the child was noble.
Arthur was his cousin.
And they put him out to be fostered
as was the custom in those days.

¹ *Wledic* is a title. A name is either followed by a patronymic, rarely a matronymic, or an epithet, which can be a title or a description. The storyteller thought *Culhwch* meant 'Pigsty' but Bromwich and Evans argue that 'Slender pigling' is more probable.

The mother's request

Dying, she called her husband to her side.
I know that you will want another wife,
but these days queens dispense the gifts.
It is wrong for you to harm your son.

So all I ask is you won't seek another bride
until you see a brier growing on my grave.
He agreed. She then sent for her priest,
whispering; see that my grave is kept clean.

He said he would and then she died.

Each day, the king dispatched a serving lad
to see if anything was growing on her grave.
After seven years the priest forgot his task
and freed the king to seek another queen.

The stepmother and the old woman²

His counsellors agreed, it was not good to be alone.
The wife of King Doget would suit him well.
So they killed that king, seized his land,
dragging his widow and daughter home.

One day the new queen went for a walk,
in the town where she was dwelling.
She met an old woman on her way
who hadn't a tooth left in her head.
'Answer me hag, and answer me truthfully,
Where are the children of this man
who abducted me so violently.'

'He has no children.'

'Woe is me' replied the queen,
'bound to a sterile man.'

'No need for tears.
There's a prophecy
he will have an heir,
and since he hasn't already,
he'll have it with you.
Don't be sad, either,
he has one son.'

² This is the first of the 'glitches'. The old woman does contradict herself.

The stepmother's curse

'What reason husband, do you have to hide your son from me?' 'I will not,' said the king and sent for him.

'Well, boy,' she said, 'it's good for you to seek a wife. I have a daughter fit for any noble in the world.'

'I am not old enough to seek a wife.' 'Then I will swear a destiny on you. Your side won't strike against a woman's

unless you get Olwen, daughter of Ysbaddaden Chief Giant.' The boy coloured, and every part of him

was filled with love for this maiden he'd never seen. 'What ails you son,' his father asked, 'why do you blush?'

'My stepmother has sworn I'll never have a wife except for Olwen merch Ysbaddaden Pencawr.' 'That's easy, son. Arthur is your cousin. Go to him. Have him trim your hair then ask this as your gift.'