

“LOVE’S SPLENDID LURES”:
ARTHUR O’SHAUGHNESSY’S *LAYS OF FRANCE*

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In 1872 Arthur O’Shaughnessy joined such poets as Tennyson, Arnold, Morris, and Swinburne in the so-called Medieval Revival with his *Lays of France* (*founded on the Lays of Marie*), featuring five lengthy narrative poems based on the twelfth-century Breton *lais* of Marie de France. Appearing as it did late in the resurgence of Victorian interest in medieval art, literature, and social structures, O’Shaughnessy’s *Lays* faced accusations of imitation and obscurity. However, a study of the specific manifestation of the medieval in his poetry reveals the literary niche O’Shaughnessy carefully carved for himself within this popular movement.

In an obituary-review article for the *Academy*, George Saintsbury complains that O’Shaughnessy’s *Lays* “were very like, or strove to be very like, one of the least imitable of contemporary poets, Mr. William Morris, of whose admirable work they were in some respects almost a caricature” (100). Saintsbury’s dismissal of O’Shaughnessy’s work as some passing fancy or throw-away imitation is unfair to the poet whose interest in the art and literature of the medieval period was sustained over many years. His first published experiment with a medieval topic appeared in his 1870 collection *Epic of Women*, wherein one of its poems, “Bisclavaret,” was inspired by Marie de France’s *lai* of the same name. But his notebooks (now at Queen’s University, Belfast), dating from 1863 to 1872, include several unpublished poems on medieval subjects not covered by Marie: “Walther of Aquitaine,” “Roland,” and “Siward,” dating from 1864 to 1868 (see Queen’s, Ms 8/3, Ms 8/12, Ms 8/20, Ms 8/26). Additionally, another notebook documents his reading from June to August of 1870, suggesting his extensive research on medieval subjects. Among these sources are Jules Labarte’s 1855 *Handbook*