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ROMANCE

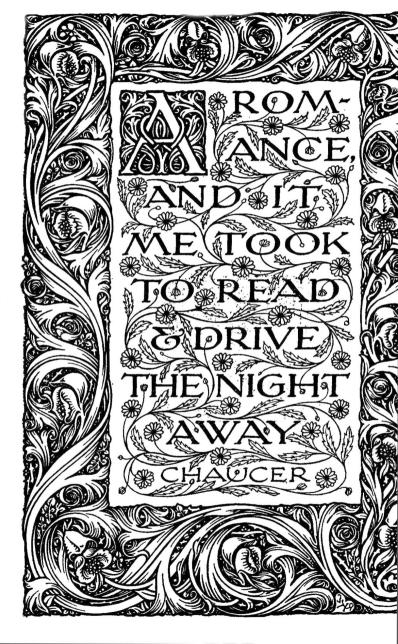
TWO ROMANCES OF THE DEATH OF ARTHUR · WITH AN INTRO-DUCTION BY LUCY ALLEN PATON THE PUBLISHERS OF EVERYMANS
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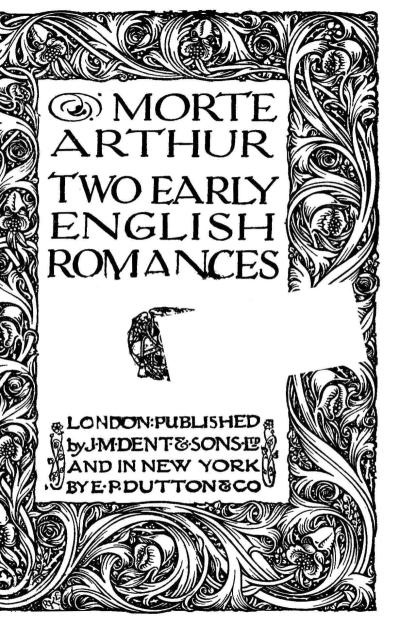
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INTRODUCTION

"In sleep I seem'd To sail with Arthur under looming shores, Point after point; till on to dawn, when dreams Begin to feel the truth and stir of day, To me, methought, who waited with a crowd, There came a bark that, blowing forward, bore King Arthur, like a modern gentleman Of stateliest port; and all the people cried, 'Arthur is come again: he cannot die.' Then those that stood upon the hills behind Repeated-' Come again, and thrice as fair;' And, further inland, voices echoed—'Come With all good things, and war shall be no more.'"

TENNYSON. Morte D'Arthur.

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THE two early English metrical romances contained in this volume—the first, Morte Arthure, in a translation into modern English: the second, Le Morte Arthur, in its original text-although they bear the same title, differ widely in their contents and in their presentation of such incidents as are common to both. The former deals chiefly with the expedition of the Britons against Rome, the treason of Modred and the death of Arthur; the latter recounts the story of the Maid of Ascolot, the course of Lancelot's love for Guinevere and, in its concluding portions, the history of Modred's treason and Arthur's final battle. Together the two romances form typical examples of the many tales that have come down to us depicting "a time that hover'd between war and wantonness." Each has a peculiar interest as an admirable member of the body of English verse romance, and also from the place that it occupies in Arthurian literature, for each stands in a close relation to the Arthurian source most familiar to English readers, the great Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malorv.

The metrical romance, like most other forms of mediæval literary composition, had its origin and most brilliant development in France. During the second half of the twelfth century, Crestien de Trois, a gifted poet at the

court of the Countess Marie de Champagne, produced the first French poetical romances. He is easily the most distinguished of a long line of French versifiers, who embodied in episodic romances material derived from many sources, but consisting principally of chivalric adventures, related in terms that reflect the life of the courts which they were destined to please. To the taste of Crestien's readers the tales afforded by the so-called "matter of Britain," already current in France, were peculiarly adapted, and lent themselves readily to him and his successors as a means for depicting the chivalric life and ideals with which they were surrounded. Crestien's work deservedly met with great success, and gave a powerful impetus to the production of lengthy chivalric poems dealing with Arthur and his knights. But in spite of the immense popularity that Arthurian verse romance attained at this period in France, it did not flourish on the neighbouring soil of England until the fourteenth century, when it had already begun to fade in its native land. It is true that the foundation for the literary development of romantic material in England had been laid in Anglo-Norman days. From the time of the Conquest, minstrels from across the Channel, ever welcome in hall and bower, had played a large part in transporting to England the tales that had been versified in France. They found their audiences in courtly circles, where the recognised language was French, where composition in the vernacular, if it had been thought of at all, would have appeared useless and undignified, and where even the tales of Anglo-Saxon heroes were dressed in the language and verse of the conquerors. By the middle of the thirteenth century, however, the English people were feeling the spirit of nationalism stir within them; the language which had existed, not as a unit. but in numerous dialects, began to be welded into a literary form, translations from the French poetical material into the vernacular were undertaken, and by the beginning of the fourteenth century, under the reign of Edward I., metrical romances in the English tongue occupied a recognised and important place in literature. The English poet, in selecting his subject-matter, was heedless of literary merit. He seized upon whatever would

prove interesting to his hearers, and pressed epic as well as romantic material into his service, treating both alike with a calm disregard of the widely differing metrical form in which French taste had embodied each. But although the early English romances represent a large variety of subjects, it is evident that the Arthurian legend was a favourite theme. The extant poems embodying it are numerous, and are often extremely valuable as representatives of lost French originals. They have also a wider interest, that appeals to the layman as well as to the scholar, in that they are excellent exponents of the spirit of England at the period when they flourished. Seldom, if ever, rising to the delicacy of form or the inventive charm of French romance, they give rich promise of many characteristics of the more distinguished periods of English literature-vigour of style, freedom and strength of vocabulary, delight in the simpler beauties of nature, and familiarity with a life passed amid her pleasures.

It was under the reign of Edward III., whose victories had developed the self-consciousness of his people, that the English language became the accepted vehicle for literary expression, and that English poetry assumed a more definitely national form. The attitude of the English at that time toward their legendary history, as Ten Brink has said, was "that of a people who throughout a long period of foreign dominion had been separated from their past." To this past, then, their thoughts turned, and its traditions acquired a peculiar value. As an altogether natural consequence of this tendency, the older alliterative form of verse, which had an archaistic flavour, was revived and became popular. More and more the verse romances were diffused among the people, and continually lost their place as the exclusive possession of polite circles. early days of this period it is probable that the alliterative poem, Morte Arthure, was composed.

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Who the author of the *Morte Arthure* was and just where he lived and wrote, are subjects of controversy. The dialect of the poem indicates that it was composed in the north-

west of England, a region where alliterative verse and also the Arthurian legend were popular. Traces of Scottish forms in its lines, however, have led some scholars to believe that its origin is to be sought in Scotland, and it has frequently been attributed to the pen of the Scotch poet Huchown, known as Huchown of the Awla Ryale (de aula regia), who lived during the middle of the fourteenth century. This attribution to Huchown is based upon a statement made by the fifteenth-century Scottish chronicler, Wyntoun, who, in his Cronykil of Scotland, speaks of Huchown in flattering terms, and mentions among his works "the gret Geste of Arthure," of which he rehearses the contents. The agreements between the material of his account and the Morte Arthure, and between the style of the Morte Arthure and that of the Pystyl of Swete Susanne. a poem of which Huchown's authorship is undisputed, have given rise to the theory that the Morte Arthure is none other than the "gret Geste of Arthure." This theory, however, appears untenable in the light of Wyntoun's further statement that he had found in Huchown's work "na writ" about Arthur's death, of which the Morte Arthure contains a detailed account. Huchown's authorship is therefore far from indisputably proved, and the poem is still most frequently classed among the great mass of anonymous mediæval productions. Its probable date of composition is assigned to about the middle of the fourteenth century (1340-1360). It exhibits the disposition manifested in many English works of the time to treat romance as fact, and it tends toward chronicle history rather than romantic narrative. The author, according to his own statement, relates his story "as salle in romance be redde," "as romawns us tellis," and "as cronycles tellys." He evidently relied principally upon the "cronycles," and used as his basis the *Historia Regum Britanniæ* of Geoffrey of Monmouth, which he supplemented with the Brut of Layamon; but it is plain that he also had before him French romances, Arthurian and non-Arthurian.

In his introductory verses the poet says that he proposes to tell a tale of the men of the Round Table, how they slew Lucius, lord of Rome, and conquered his kingdom by force of arms. The poem falls into three parts, the first of which,

extending to the time when Arthur had "richly rebuked the Romans for ever," 1 and the second, which ends after the Pope's offer to crown Arthur king of Rome,2 correspond to these two divisions of his subject; the third and last part, which has to do with Modred's treachery and Arthur's death, the poet says nothing about in his introduction. possibly because it sheds less lustre upon Arthur's fame than the story of his Roman campaign. The first and third parts are based upon the chronicles; the second, which is principally taken up with Arthur's expedition against the Duke of Lorraine and an adventure of Gawain, appears to have for its source a non-Arthurian episodic romance, supplemented by the author's own narrative. It is also evident that his presentation of Lancelot, Iwain, Gawain, and Modred belongs to a more advanced stage of Arthurian story than is found in the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Layamon, and implies an acquaintance with later Arthurian material than that recounted by them.

The author was a person of true originality, of which he continually gives evidence, and especially in certain interpolations that are plainly his own. The most important of these are the accounts of Arthur's reception of the Roman ambassadors,3 the reluctance of Modred to accept the care of the kingdom in Arthur's absence, and Guinevere's grief at parting from Arthur,4 both of which enhance the tragedy of their subsequent faithlessness, the wonderful hues of the dragon in Arthur's dream,5 the contest with the giant Golapas,6 and the nine kings of the wheel of Fortune.7 Perhaps his most remarkable display of ingenuity is seen in Arthur's combat with the giant of St. Michael's Mount, where he uses as his main source Geoffrey's account of the same adventure, but also weaves into his narrative details drawn from an episode of which Kay and Bedewere were doubtless the original heroes, as well as from the story of Arthur's contest with the giant Ritho, which receives merely a brief mention in Geoffrey's version.8 Our poet was also gifted

¹V. 2371; below, p. 51. ²V. 3206; below, p. 69. ³VV. 116-242; below, pp. 3-6. ⁴VV. 648-720; below, pp. 14-16. ⁵VV. 764-770; below, p. 17. ⁶VV. 2111-2134; below, p. 46. ⁷VV. 3269-3362; below, pp. 71-73. ⁸The foregoing conclusions in regard to the sources of the poem are those reached by Branscheid in his careful study mentioned below in the bibliography.

with a rich imagination, which is seen in many of the details with which he expands his source, as, for example, in his minute descriptions of the robe of Arthur and of the pilgrim's weeds of Cradok, of the Roman camp, and in general of the armour of warriors and of the fabrics worn by fair ladies. In the latter part of the poem he treats his sources freely and interpolates largely. The long account of the king's dream of Fortune and her wheel, for instance, is entirely an addition to the chronicle sources, but it is not to be regarded necessarily as a production of the author's own brain; dreams and the wheel of Fortune are commonplace in mediæval literature, and any writer had at his disposal an abundance of sources for such an episode as this.

The poet's rôle is, however, as I have said, that of a chronicler and not of a dealer in fiction. His treatment of the story of Arthur's death is very characteristic. The belief, existing as early as the twelfth century, that Arthur had not died on his final battlefield, and that he would surely return to earth, had assumed in the course of time several forms in popular tradition.1 The early and mythical version of the story represented the wounded king as transported for healing from his final battlefield to Avalon, the fairvland of romance, whence he would return to earth when he was whole once more. This tradition the author of the Morte Arthure had found rationalised in Geoffrey's pages, and told in one mythical form in Layamon's Brut. But the version that he adopted is a purely historical narrative, representing the king as slain in battle and buried at Glastonbury, a place which owing to a curious confusion in legend and etymology had been earlier identified with Avalon. This is typical of his aim, which was to tell his story from the historical point of view,--"to telle a tale, that trewe is and nobylle," and in doing this he discarded many fantastic elements. His manner throughout is that of the earnest chronicler, unspoiled by the con-

¹ For a discussion of the early and persistent belief in Arthur's return to earth, and for the forms which this belief assumed, see my Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance, Boston, 1902; Mort Artu, ed. J. D. Bruce, Halle, 1900, notes to p. 250, ll. 3 ff.; p. 251, ll. 1 ff.; also, in a mere résumé, Arthurian Chronicles (Everyman's Library), Introduction, Excursus III.

ventions of courtly romance. He writes essentially in the spirit of a man to whom the world about him is interesting and very real. His appreciation of nature is fresh and genuine; he lingers pleasantly over his descriptions of woods and fields—the swift river where "the trees overreach with royal boughs," where the banks flourish with "flowers full many," and all the fowls "flit about that fly with wings," where the sound of the water and singing of the birds "might salve him of sore that sound was never." Gawain, he tells us, waits with his men in the misty morning in a meadow of new-mown hay, "full of sweet flowers, . . . till the graying of the day, when birds begin to sing, until the rising of the sun that is sent of Christ." His humour is equally unaffected. Arthur cleaves the giant Golapas asunder at the knees, "'Come down,' quoth the king, 'to talk to thy comrades; thou art too high by half, I promise thee, in sooth. Thou shalt be handsomer in height, with the help of my Lord.'" His pathos is even more simple, as, for instance, in Modred's lament over the body of Gawain, his "matchless" comrade, whom his treason has destroyed. "That traitor quickly let hot tears fall, quickly turns him away and talks no more, goes weeping away, and curses the hours that ever his fate was wrought to work such woe;" and again in Arthur's sorrow, when he finds "Gawayne the gude in his gaye armes" lying dead:—"'The king of all knights that under Christ lived, Thou wast worthy to be king, though I the crown bare."

It is a tribute to Malory's discrimination that he used a work of such high merit as this poem as the source for the fifth book of his *Morte Darthur*. The theory that he did so is based upon the resemblances in phraseology and in order of incident, both of which are so close that Malory is regarded as having simply made a prose redaction of the poem, with, however, many omissions and some misunderstandings. The latter part of the *Morte Arthure* ¹ he did not employ, for he embodies in his twenty-first book material dealing with the same theme, but derived from another source.

¹ Vv. 3217 to end; below, pp. 69 ff.

III

The stanzaic poem, Le Morte Arthur, has received far less attention from critics than the earlier Morte Arthure. It possesses in fact less literary distinction, but has high merit of its own, and from its material is more attractive to the general reader. It has, moreover, a special interest, both because it is our first version in English of the story of the Maid of Ascolot, made familiar to us all in Tennyson's Elaine, and also because it is the first English source to preserve the mythical and romantic account of Arthur's death in a form more sophisticated than that given by Layamon, and destined to receive an established place in modern English poetry in Tennyson's Morte D'Arthur.

Our poem is contained in a unique manuscript in the British Museum, written in two hands, the first of which ends with verse 1001. Its dialect is Midland, and although scholars are divided in opinion as to whether it is East or North-west Midland, the evidence points somewhat more conclusively to the latter. The dialect of the scribes was evidently also Midland, although the second uses southern forms not found in the work of the first. Linguistic evidence points to the latter part of the fourteenth century as the probable date of composition. Here again we are dealing with the work of an unknown author. It has been suggested that it was written by the poet who composed the Lyfe of Ipomydon, which is contained in the same manuscript, but the differences in style between the two works form strong arguments against the identity of their authors. The form and style of the poem indicate that the writer belonged to the minstrel class. It is written in stanzas of eight lines of four accents each. In general the lines rhyme alternately, but irregularities sometimes occur. A few stanzas contain only seven verses, owing perhaps to an omission on the part of the scribe in copying, or on the part of the poet, who either may not have noticed or may not have thought it worth while to supply the defect in a work which he was undoubtedly composing primarily for purposes of narration. The poem has been compared to a ballad, and although the impersonal tone, which is one of

the chief characteristics of ballad poetry, is interrupted by occasional references to a source (as, in the romans as we rede, v. 2363; so says the boke, v. 2493), in the directness and flow of the narrative and in the verse structure, the production is more nearly allied to the ballad than to the metrical romance.

The question of the sources of the poem, and its relation to Malory's Morte Darthur, Books XVIII., XX., and XXI., has been the subject of a spirited controversy between Dr. H. O. Sommer and Professor J. D. Bruce. The limits of this introduction do not permit a discussion, nor even an adequate summary of the views advanced by either scholar. The reader who would acquaint himself fully with the question is referred to the articles on the subject mentioned in the bibliography given below. Suffice it to say briefly here that the similarities coupled with the differences in contents and phraseology between the French prose romance of Lancelot, Malory, and Le Morte Arthur point to the conclusion that the two latter works are to be traced to a common French original now lost, which for the Eighteenth Book of Malory and verses 1-1672 of Le Morte Arthur was a redaction of the French prose Lancelot. and for the remainder of the poem and the Twentieth and Twenty-first Books of Malory was another redaction of the Lancelot, which differed slightly from that used as the source for the earlier part of the poem.

In considering the merits and defects of our author, we shall do well to acknowledge and dismiss his special weakness before turning to his virtues. He is far from exact or accomplished in the use of rhyme; in fact his supply of rhyme-words is extraordinarily limited even for his day and generation, and he draws upon it with painfully infrequent variation. He also has a pronounced liking for certain poetic formulas, such as, "is not to hyde," "breme as boar," "tille on a tyme that it by-felle," "hend and fre," "withouten lese," to which he turns in many a time of need. But in spite of this rather excessive subservience to convention, and although he lacks the vigour of imagination, the intensity of feeling and the originality in description that the poet of the *Morte Arthure* possessed, he manifests real power as an easy and agreeable story-teller,

who by the quiet, even beauty of his poem, which comes like the gentle peal of a bell after the rush and force of the vigorous lines of the Morte Arthure, cannot fail to please. The charm of his simple narration of a story singularly appealing to the human nature of all periods, is altogether unlike the courtly tone of the diffuse French prose romances among which he found his sources, and is due without question to his own ability as a raconteur. Perhaps his most noticeable characteristic is his facility in bringing vividly before us by a few direct dramatic words the human interest of the scenes that he is describing. For example, the tragedy of Lancelot's love for Guinevere is summed up, as Professor Bruce has pointed out, in the exclamation of the knights—

"'Allas,' they sayde, 'launcelot du lake, That euyr shuldistow se the quene!'"

Almost equally moving are the words with which Lancelot seeks to defend himself from the slanders against him to which the king has listened—

"'I was nevyr far frome the, When thou had any sorow strange;'"

and the few sentences that fall from Gawain's lips as he looks on the dead face of the Maid of Ascolot convey without comment the pathos of her fate—

"' For hyr biaute with-oute lesynge
I wold fayne wete of hyr kynde,
What she was, this swete derelynge,
And in hyr lyff where she gonne lind.'"

The language of the poem offers few difficulties, but to aid readers who have only a slight familiarity with English of the fourteenth century, the meaning of obsolete words and such as may not be readily recognised in the fourteenth-century form is given in a glossary at the end of the volume. This glossary has been prepared not at all for scientific purposes, but solely with the view of presenting a practical aid to the enjoyment of the poem; deficiencies, of which I scarcely dare hope there are none, may be supplied from the more complete glossaries in the editions of the poem mentioned, from which I have drawn copiously in preparing my own explanations.

It would be profitable to dwell at length upon the central element of Le Morte Arthur, the love of Lancelot and Guinevere, and to trace, so far as our present knowledge enables us, its evolution from its early place in an independent other-world quest of Lancelot to its appearance as a prime factor in the destruction of the Round Table and the death of Arthur. Our two poems form the best possible illustration of the development of the story of Arthur's death from an event in chronicle history to the tragic culmination of a romance. But it would lead us far beyond our space here to review the material that fills the gap existing between the final lament of Arthur on the battlefield in the Morte Arthure, "I for a traitor have lost all my true lords. Here rests the rich blood of the Round Table overthrown by a rebel," and the words of Queen Guinevere in her farewell to Sir Lancelot in Malory: "Through this man and me hath all this war been wrought and the death of the most noblest knights of the world; for through our love that we have loved together is my most noble lord slain "

LUCY ALLEN PATON.

FLORENCE, June 1912.

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