

1899

Tennyson's Debt to the "Morte D'Arthur"

Sally Rodman Thompson
University of Rhode Island

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lippitt_prize

 Part of the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thompson, Sally Rodman, "Tennyson's Debt to the "Morte D'Arthur"" (1899). *Student and Lippitt Prize essays*. Paper 34.
http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lippitt_prize/34http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/lippitt_prize/34

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student and Lippitt Prize essays by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

TENNYSON'S DEBT TO THE "MORTE d'ARTHUR.

SALLY RODMAN THOMPSON

CLASS OF '99.

TENNYSON'S DEBT TO THE MORTE d'ARTHUR.

More than four centuries ago, when the art of printing had just been introduced into England, the first edition of Sir Thomas Malory's "Morte d'Arthur" appeared at Westminster. This book with its tales of daring adventure, its pictures of chivalric deeds performed by King Arthur and his chosen knights of the Round Table, stirred the imagination of many a young reader; and when three centuries later a copy of it fell into the hands of the boy Tennyson, it aroused in him the desire to write of the glorious exploits of Britain's early king. The desire of the boy became the lifework of the man, and after forty years "The Idylls of the King," with all their grace of form and beauty of expression, were given to the world, and the poet's aim was realized.

Tennyson's work is composed of twelve books; each affording a glimpse into the character of the noble king and his valiant knights. Malory's work is much longer and is more like a history; Malory is the realist, Tennyson the idealist. In Malory we are conscious of the artisan, in Tennyson of the artist. That Tennyson received his inspiration from Malory is undeniable; but in the development of that inspiration he depended only upon his own thoughts and fancies, his own conceptions of what was good and noble in mankind.

In the *Morte d'Arthur*, King Arthur commands Merlin, the wise man of the court, to go to Leodogrance and ask the hand of Guinevere in marriage. The king gladly consents and sends his daughter with Merlin to Arthur, giving him at the same time the famous Round Table with one hundred chosen knights.

The first book of the "Idylls" is "The Coming of Arthur." As Tennyson tells the story, Leodogran, King of Camelot, had one daughter, Guinevere, who was very dear to him. The country round about was continually ravaged and laid waste by "heather hordes from beyond the sea." Leodogran heard of Arthur "newly crowned" and sent to him for aid. As yet King Arthur had accomplished no deeds of arms, but he came at the summons of Leodogran; and as he and his knights rode by, Guinevere stood by the castle-wall to watch them pass. Arthur saw and loved her; and when he had conquered the invader, he asked as a reward the hand of Guinevere. King Leodogran was very loath to grant his request especially as Arthur was believed to be a usurper and not of royal birth. Arthur's friends came forward and proved him to be the son of King Uther, the former ruler of the country. Leodogran sent messengers with his consent to Arthur's court;

"Then Arthur charged his warrior whom he loved

And honored most, Sir Lancelot, to ride forth
 And bring the Queen, and watched him from the gate
 And Lancelot passed away among the flowers
 For then was later April and returned
 Among the flowers of May, with Guinevere."

The following three books of the "Idylls,"-- "Gareth and Lynette," "The Marriage of Geraint," "Geraint and Enid"-- appear to have no counterpart in Malory; but the next, "Balin and Balan" corresponds to "The Book of Sir Balin the Savage" in the "Morte d'Arthur". The narratives of the two differ greatly however. In this case Malory's tale is more picturesque and romantic than that of Tennyson, and it is worthy of note, that this is the only instance where the story of the poet is less ideal than that of the prose writer.

The books of "Merlin and Vivien" and "Lancelot and Elaine" follow. In these the reader also sees a great difference in the treatment which the two writers have given the same subject. Then comes the "Story of the Search for the Holy Grail." This is the most beautiful of the "Idylls." In it, the poet expresses what is true and noble in himself, and his trust and belief in the reality of the spiritual life. The story is familiar to everyone. King Arthur's

knights start out in search of the "Holy Grail", the cup made sacred by our Saviour's use at the Last Supper, and all prove unworthy save Galahad, the guileless knight, who through his beautiful pure life receives the reward denied to all his brother knights.

Malory's description of the "Search for the Holy Grail" is much longer than that of Tennyson, but one feels in reading it that it is merely an account of some marvelous adventure; while in the "Idylls" one recognizes the spiritual significance of that quest. Tennyson himself said of it, "I have expressed there my strongest feelings as to the reality of the Unseen." These three verses of Arthur's speech at the close of the poem are the "spiritually" central lines of the "Idylls".

"In moments when he feels he cannot die,
Nor knows himself no vision of himself
Nor the High God a vision."

In Malory's "Book of Morgan le May," there is a story which corresponds to Tennyson's " Pelleas and Etarre;" but the Morte d'Arthur has no companion to the poet's tale of Tristan and Isolde which he tells in "The Last Tournament."

The next book of Malory is that of "Sir Lancelot and the

King;" this corresponds to Tennyson's "Guinevere." In Malory the narrative is as follows; Sir Modred spreads false reports of Sir Lancelot and the Queen. The king, instead of proving their falsity, banishes Sir Lancelot from the court. The knight goes to his own castle, there his kinsmen and followers join him and tell him that the queen has been condemned to death and that she is to be burned. Sir Lancelot determines to rescue her, although he knows that many brave knights will be sacrificed in the attempt. He conceals himself with his followers until the queen passes by to the stake, they then rush forward, scatter the guard that surrounds her, and Sir Lancelot carries her to his castle Joyous Gard. For a long time war rages between Sir Lancelot and the king and "many goodly knights are slain." At length the knight goes to the king and tells him that the queen has been falsely accused, and begs him to allow her to return to the court. Arthur finally consents to her return. Sir Lancelot brings the queen to the king, then leaves the court forever.

The narrative of Tennyson's "Guinevere" is very different. Through the treachery of Modred, King Arthur learns of Lancelot's love for Guinevere. When the Queen hears that her disloyalty to the king is discovered, she flees to the cloister at Alsbury and Lancelot goes

to his own fortress. In the meantime Sir Modred incites the other knights to revolt against their king. Arthur finds the Queen hidden in the cloister, grants her his pardon, and tells her that although they can never be united again on earth, he still loves her and they may be reunited in the heavenly life. He then bids her farewell and sets out to subdue Modred and the traitor knights. Guinevere remains in the cloister; and when the Abbess dies,

"she for her good deeds and her pure life
 And for the power of ministration in her,
 And likewise for the high rank she had borne,
 Was chosen Abbess, there an Abbess lived
 For these brief years, and there an Abbess passed
 To where beyond these voices there is peace."

And now we come to the death of Arthur. In the *Morte d'Arthur*, Modred is left in charge of the country, while King Arthur goes to fight Sir Lancelot. Modred usurps the throne, sends out reports of King Arthur's death and plans to wed Guinevere. The queen shuts herself up in the city of London; Arthur starts to return to his kingdom; Modred raises an army to oppose him; a battle follows in which the king is mortally wounded. When Queen Guinevere hears that

he is dead, she enters the nunnery at Almsbury, and dwells there until her own death.

Tennyson's story in "The Passing of Arthur" is quite different from this. Before the battle between Arthur and his traitorous knights the king has a vision which warns him that he will be killed by Modred. The battle begins and Arthur is fatally wounded. Before dying he commands Sir Bedivere, the only knight who has remained faithful to him, to cast his magic sword Excalibur into the Lake. Twice Sir Bedivere, thinking it wrong to throw away such a wonderful weapon, hides it on the shore, in hopes of satisfying his lord and of saving the sword. The king is not deceived, however, and Sir Bedivere is finally obliged to obey his command. As he casts it into the water, he sees a hand grasp and draw it beneath the surface. Sir Bedivere returns and tells the king what has happened. The latter is at last satisfied and bids the knight carry him to the shore of the lake. A boat containing three queens now approaches. They lift King Arthur into it, and then it floats silently away leaving no trace behind.

There are two ways in which the "Idylls of the King" may be regarded. They may be considered merely as poetical adaptations of the old Arthurian legends, for which Tennyson was deeply indebted to

looked upon

Malory; or they may be regarded as having a deeper significance. By the association of Arthur and his knights of the Round Table in an organization to promote the common weal Tennyson meant to portray ideal social relations. These could not long endure, however, the knights were human. They were overcome by their passions and dissensions arose which finally ended in the death of Arthur. In this latter conception, Tennyson expresses a truth oft repeated in his poems; that no great social reform can ever be forced upon humanity. It is only by gradual growth and development that mankind will become fitted to understand life in its noblest, fullest sense; and not until there is such perfect understanding will the brotherhood of man be realized and

"all men's good

Be each man's rule, and universal peace

Lie like a shaft of light across the land."