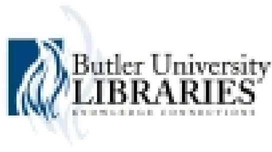

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THE TREATMENT OF ARTHURIAN LEGEND IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

A Thesis Presented to the Academic Faculty
of Butler University in Candidacy
for the Degree of Master of Arts

by

Mary Coate McNeely

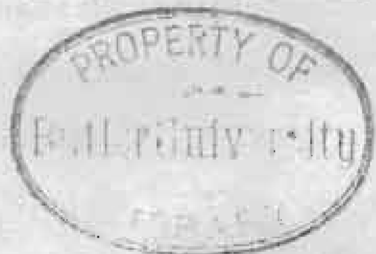

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I	Historical Basis for and Early Literary Treatment of the Arthurian Legend	1
II	Thomas Hardy's "Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall	22
III	Edwin Arlington Robinson	33
	a. "Merlin"	.36
	b. "Lancelot"	.37
	c. "Tristram"	46
IV	John Masefield	58
	a. "Tristan and Isolt"	58
	b. "Midsummer Night"	69
V	Laurence Binyon's "Arthur" . . .	85
VI	John Erskine's "Galahad"	93
VII	Conclusion	102

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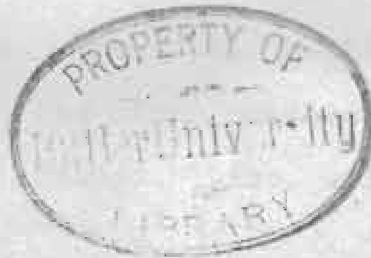
CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BASIS FOR AND LITERARY TREATMENT OF THE ARTHURIAN LEGEND



For out of olde feldes, as men seith,
Cometh al this newe corn fro yere to yere;
And out of olde bokes, in good feith,
Cometh al this newe science that men lere.[1]

One of our richest literary heritages is the Arthurian Legend. It has been the source of inspiration for great literary works and promises not to be soon exhausted. Through the individual interpretations of various masters the legend was widened in scope and enriched until its present comprehensive variety was reached.

This great body of legend, however, sprang from a germ of fact. That there did exist a man named Arthur who fought the invading Saxons is reasonably well established by historical evidence.[2] The fact that the Welsh monk Gildas, writing about 500 A. D. a tirade on the shortcomings of his contemporaries, does not mention Arthur who would have been at the height of his career at that time should not be taken as conclusive evidence that he did not exist.[3] In the first place, the very nature of Gildas' work would exclude mention of noble deeds or worthy characters. Then, too, he is most wary about giving any names -- even the fiery Boadicea, whose staunch revolt is related, is left unnamed. Also, Gildas was obviously a Roman

1 Geoffrey Chaucer.
2 For historical mention of Arthur see The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. By Edward Gibbon. Volume IV, Chapter XXXVIII. Also, British History Chronologically Arranged. By Arthur Hassall. Page 7. Also, Early Britain, by Alfred J. Church. Page 100.
3 The title of Gildas' chronicle is De Excidio Britanniae.

sympathizer and this would lead him to disdain the native leaders. Such evidence as this is more than counterbalanced by the "Historia Britonum," written about 800 by another Welsh Monk, Nennius, in which there is mention of a general called Arthur who led the Britons to victory at Mt. Badon and distinguished himself in the battle where "fell by Arthur's own hand in one day nine hundred sixty of the heathen." [1]

There are, also, several records of the popular traditions concerning Arthur. In another part of Nennius' book, devoted to the "Marvels of Britain," he tells of a miraculous stone on top a mound where Caval, Arthur's dog, impressed his footprint one day on a hunt for the wild boar, Troynt. This stone, left on top a cairn by Arthur as a memorial, might be carried off but would return magically to its place. Another of the marvels, having to do with Arthur which Nennius included is the mound wherein the "dux bellorum" buried his son, Anir, and which when measured is never the same length. Further documentary evidence of this popular legend is furnished by a French monk who with eight of his brothers visited England and later wrote an account of his journey. In this account he tells of seeing certain rocks in Cornwall, called "Arthur's seat" and "Arthur's oven." He also encountered a tradition that Arthur lived and would come again. Then, in the writings of William of Malmesbury, in 1125, mention is

1 From Eulogium Brittaniae Sive Historia Britonum, Auctore Nennio.

made of the stories of Arthur as being common among the people.

However, it remained for Geoffrey of Monmouth to re-create with great elaboration from popular hearsay, from all historical sources and from his own imagination this Arthur of the battlefields. Geoffrey probably drew from all existent history and sketches for his "Historia Regum Brittanniae" (1137), which purported to record the lives of the British kings down to a period later than the Saxon conquest. But the idealized Arthur, the King, is probably Geoffrey's own creation, although the Briton war leader by his own prowess and fame had no doubt drawn to himself much coloring of hero-worship. In Geoffrey's accounts we first meet the romantic Arthur, now of royal lineage, the chronicler going into some detail as to the birth of Arthur and the mysterious part played by Merlin. He portrays the whole life of the son of Uther -- his conquests at home and abroad, till on the eve of his march on Rome the news of Mordred's treachery and adultery with Guanhumara, the Queen, caused him to return home where in battle with the nephew-traitor he is mortally wounded. In his later "Vita Merlini" Geoffrey is more explicit as to the fate of Arthur, telling of the journey to Avalon where he was to be healed of his wounds.

This first appearance of the Arthur of the poets in all the glamour of courtliness and chivalric grace was sheer

fabrication designed to win favor for the author at court. The real Arthur unquestionably was not such a refined and gracious hero. British warriors of that day did not array themselves in costly, gleaming armor and ride handsome chargers, bedecked with silver-tinkling trappings, nor feast in magnificent halls, but rather lived a crude, primitive existence, battle-clad in shaggy skins with a crude shield and buckler and probably fought on foot. The magnificence, heroism and royalty of Arthur enters the legend as the contribution of Geoffrey of Monmouth and it is to him or accounts derived from him that later authors have gone for their inspiration.

The characters which have grouped themselves about the central figure of Arthur are from not only British, but also Celtic, Irish, Oriental, Germanic and French sources, irresistably drawn to the romantic hero and forming such a great tradition as to exceed in popularity even the Charlemagne cycle.

In Geoffrey's pseudo-historical work the Arthurian legend is justified as worthy material for literature. It is not until the translation of it into Norman-French by Wace, in 1155, that the story takes on much color or vividness or the court of Arthur grows up, only the knights Kay and Bedivere appearing in Geoffrey's treatment. The chief contribution of Wace is, however, that legend of the Round Table, instituted, according to Wace, to settle the baronial dispute as to rank at the table -- it is interesting to note that even at this

early date precedence at table was a matter of contention.

Some years later another historian, Layamon, translated into English and enlarged Wace's "Roman de Brut." Significant additions to the story at this time were 1) the Englishizing of Arthur who is now English king and hero, 2) a description of his magic sword, Caliburn, forged in Avalon, his gem-encrusted helmet, Goswheet, and his shield, Pridwin, on which there is an image of the virgin, 3) a further supernatural element regarding the institution of the Round Table, probably a Welsh tradition of much earlier date and 5) more detail as to Arthur's journey to Avalon and the suggestion that he will return.

After the chronicles the next important step in the development of the Arthurian legend was the lais. These short, poetic fairy stories were important chiefly because they spread in France the British stories and there accumulated various material to the body of the legend. Marie de France, one of the most notable writers of lais, wrote two Arthurian poems which no doubt represent many others lost to us. The first of these is "Lanval" and the other "Chieverefoil," which introduces the Tristam-Iseult story. The lais succeed in gilding over the roughness of the older stories with chivalric and courtly grace.[1] Chretien de Troyes,

1 Norman literature is noted for its graceful, light, poetic fancy and delicate, rythmical qualities.

another lai-ist, wrote six Arthurian lais, the Tristram story, which Malory probably used,[1] "Eric and Enide," later followed by Tennyson,[2] "Cliges," a distinct matter only loosely joined to the Arthurian, "Le Chevalier de la Charrette," a development of the Lancelot-Guinevere story, "Yvain" and "Perceval," which embodies the first account of the Grail in Arthurian matter. These poetical romances became bases for later prose romances which loosely united the main themes into one group. The main elements comprising the Arthurian legend were now gathered together in one literary form, these lais of Chretien, and remain today essentially the same. They are the Merlin legend, the Lancelot legend, the Holy Grail legend, and the Tristram-Isolt legend. These with the main Arthurian story make up Arthurian legend as we know it today.

Unfortunately Chaucer did not use any Arthurian matter, although he seems to have been familiar with it, mentioning in various connections Arthur's knights. Lancelot he conceived as the conventional courtly lover "That wommen holde in ful gret reverence," He also mentions Gawain's son, Libeaus, and Perceval. Although the scene of the Tale of the Wyf of Bathe is laid at Arthur's court there is no reason to suppose that any particular significance derives

1 See the Morte Darthur, Books VIII, IX and X.
2 See the Idylls of the King, "Geraint and Enid."

from the choice of Arthurian background, or that any other court would not have served as well.

The metrical story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight emphasizes the adventure element of all Arthurian and chivalric literature. It is interesting, also, for the favorable picture of Gawain who here is Arthur's best knight though in later treatments he becomes somewhat despicable and ignoble. Two later metrical treatments are the Morte Arthure, which deals with Arthur's conquests, his return to England and consequent death, and a fourteenth century alliterative poem, Le Morte Arthur, dealing with the Lancelot Elaine story, the wars between Lancelot and the king, Mordred's treachery and the death of Arthur. The account of Arthur's death and the restoration of Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake parallels Tennyson's account.

The importance of the next Arthurian work is attested by the fact that William Caxton, first printer in England,[1] found it worthy to be printed and writes for it the Preface. Malory's Morte Darthur is the first successful attempt to co-ordinate and combine all the various Arthurian matter into one unified whole. Significant are the words of Caxton:

1 Caxton introduced printing in England in about 1476. He was not only printer, but editor, translator and critic.

> "Many noble and diverse gentlemen of this realm of England came and demanded me ofttimes, wherefore I have not do made and imprint the noble history of the Saint Greal and of the most renowned Christian king, first and chief of the three best christian, and worthy king Arthur, which ought most to be remembered amongst us Englishmen tofore all other Christian kings ..... that divers men hold opinion that there was no such Arthur, and that all such books as been made of him be but feigned and fables, because that some chronicles make of him no mention (Caxton refers here to Gildas), nor remember him nothing, nor of his knights ..... that in him that should say or think that there was never such a king called Arthur, might well be aretted great folly and blindness. For he said that there were many evidences of the contrary. First ye may see his sepulchre in the monastery of Glastingbury. And also in the Policronicon, in the 5th book the 6th chapter, and in the 7th book the 23rd chapter, where his body was buried, and after found, and translated into the said monastery; ..... First in the abbey of Westminster, at St. Edward's shrine, remaineth the print of his seal in red wax closed in beryl, in which is written, Patricius Arthurus Britannie, Gallie, Germanie, Dacie, Imperator. Item in the castle at Dover ye may see Gawain's scull, and Cradok's mantle; at Winchester the Round Table; in other places Launcelot's sword and many other things. Then all these things considered, there can no man reasonable gainsay but there was a king of this land named Arthur." [1]

All of which interesting if unconvincing data probably was a part of Caxton's clever scheme to satisfy the popular demand for authenticity. It is significant in that the last sentence here quoted is the conclusion of scholars today.

Malory, as Caxton says, "reduced"his story from the French. This involved a great deal of culling over and

1 The Preface from which this quotation is taken may be found in the Globe edition of the Morte Darthur.

selecting from the conglomeration of popular legend. Malory secures unity for these diverse elements in the court of Arthur to which each story is drawn. Aimless as his work seems in some chapters (which divisions are the work of Caxton), there is simplicity and swiftness, even Homeric swiftness of action in the individual episodes, and the charm of honesty which abhors all squeamishness.

Malory develops the treatment of Arthur's miraculous armor. One of the most beautiful of the little pictures in which Malory excels is that describing the winning of Excalibur. Merlin is riding with Arthur after the miraculous escape from Pellinore.

> "So they rode till they came to a lake, the which was a fair water and broad, and in the midst of the lake Arthur was ware of an arm clothed in white samite, that held a fair sword in that hand." [1]

Merlin then warns Arthur to cherish the scabbard which, he says, will render the wearer invulnerable. Malory, then, endows the weapons with supernatural power inherent in them.

Due to the fact that Malory translates his characters from their original settings, lai, romance, history or mere tradition, they often seem to lack coherence. For instance, the Arthur who executes all children born on May-day in his

1 Morte Darthur, Book I, Chapter XXIII.

vain effort to forestall prophesied events[1] is scarcely consistent with the Arthur to whom the Scottish king says, "unto you is none like nor pareil in all Christendom of knighthode ne of dignity," [2] nor with that Arthur who graciously and considerately greets a petitioner after availing "his visor with a meek and noble countenance." [3] In Malory, however, we find the nearest approach to the historical Arthur -- the man of action, bloody fighter, vigorous and rough, with, nevertheless, a gentler side, probably Malory's own conception. He is here the conventional king.

The same contradictions appear in the two other main characters, Guinevere and Lancelot. Guinevere is at one time wilful and petulant, as when she hears of the Maid of Astolat,[4] and again when Lancelot has returned after the Grail quest,[5] or she may be splendid in service, as when she insisted on nursing the knights taken prisoner along with her by Meliagrance:

> "But in no wise the queen would not suffer the wounded knights to be from her, but they were laid within draughts by her chamber, upon beds and pillows, that she herself might see to them, that they wanted nothing." [6]

1 Morte Darthur, Book I, Chapter XXV.
2 Ibid., Book V, Chapter II.
3 Ibid., Book V, Chapter XII.
4 Ibid., Book XVIII, Chapter XX.
5 Ibid., Book XVIII, Chapter II.
6.Ibid., Book XIX, Chapter VI.

In spite of these inconsistencies the outlines are laid for most later treatments of the "golden Queen." Lancelot is the most individual of the three. He even overshadows the King sometimes in nobility of character; he is always meek and patient with Guinevere, which Arthur is not; he is the model of humility, as is illustrated by the incident of the healing of Sir Urre, where Lancelot, after succeeding where all others had failed does not boast, but "ever Sir Lancelot wept as he had been a child that had been beaten;" [1] he is, in fine, the embodiment of all knightly virtues and except for his great sin the most nearly perfect of all.

We have seen that Malory attains unity through the court of Arthur which stands as the point of origin for every adventure or is in some way connected with every incident. There is, however, one rather remarkable exception, the Tristram-Isolt episode. Malory evidently tried to incorporate it into his main theme, but it refuses to give up its own entity, and in spite of Malory's making Tristram one of Arthur's knights and even his rescuer on more than one occasion, the story retains its independence and threatens to become a serious rival to the Guinevere-Lancelot story. Nor has it in subsequent works been successfully subordinated to the Arthurian

1 Morte Darthur, Book XIX, Chapter XII.

story proper.

It was, then, Malory's purpose to present the Arthurian legend in its entirety as a chivalric panorama and we feel that to him, at least, Arthurian life was a gigantic spectacle which he tried to convey to his pages by means of many little pictures and a rambling thread of main plot, with the court of Arthur as the political element and centralizing factor.

Quite different is Spenser's approach to Arthurian matter. He was the product of an individualistic age, an age which abounded in outstanding individual achievement. It was not the achievements of individuals, however, that interested Spenser, but rather their spiritual growth. His Arthur is an entirely different conception from Malory's. A letter to Sir Walter Raleigh gives Spenser's purpose stated in his own words:

> "The generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline: Which for that conceiued shoulde be most plausible and pleasing being coloured with an historical fiction, the which the most part of men delight to read, rather for variety of matter, than for profite of the ensample; I chose the historye of king Arthure, as most fitte for the excellency of his person, being made famous by many men's former works, and also furthest from the daunger of enuy, and suspition of present time..." [1]

Spenser, then, was interested not in reproducing the

1 This letter may be found in the Oxford University Press edition of Spenser's works. Page 407.

legendary Arthur and his knights, but in the adaptability of the legend to his own ideas. He was, indeed, influenced by other great traditions than this chivalric one, namely, the Greek and the Biblical. Then, too, he was obsessed with a love of beauty. Arthur becomes, under Spenser's handling, simply a knight in quest of true beauty and as he enters the affairs of the other knights he represents divine grace. Thus he is a curious compound of Platonic and Christian conceptions. Spenser in his letter to Raleigh says that Gloriana, the Faery Queen, represents Glory, and Arthur Munificence. So we see that his conception of the ideal gentleman is one who devotes his life to the love of Glory (the search for the Faery Queen), a life of service (the interventions in the adventures of the other knights) and a life of virtuous discipline. There was no such intellectual conception in Malory.

Spenser's use of Arthur's armor, also, differs from Malory's. The supernatural element is here spiritualized and the spiritual excellence of Arthur is transferred to his weapons but no miraculous power inheres in the weapons themselves. Arthur's shield represents the divine energy of God, which can nullify all effects of black magic. Even the Squire's horn is endowed with this spiritual power.

Interesting as is the intellectual content of the "Faery Queen" we cannot feel that Spenser was interested in adding to the

Arthurian legend, but rather saw in it a fitting vehicle for his own thought. To be sure, there are points of similarity between this and earlier works, such as the jewel on Arthur's helmet in the image of a lady, the Blatant Beast which reminds us of Malory's Questing Beast, Lady Briana's whim to possess a mantle trimmed with the beards of knights and locks of ladies, recalling Ryence's demand for Arthur's beard. However, Spenser disregards so much of the fundamental legend as to be almost excluded from the true Arthurian poets.

All this leads to the conclusion that our legend has reached its maturity. Interest from this time on will center not in additions to the story, but in the new interpretations and reactions of different ages. We have arrived in Spenser at the modern viewpoint; medievalism has abdicated in favor of modernism.

Various writers after Spenser use with varying success the Arthurian legend and some whom we would most have wished to do so fail to use it (Shakespeare[1] and Milton[2]), but it is not until the nineteenth century that the next significant treatment is made and Tennyson's Arthurian poems are generally considered supreme among all modern uses of the legend. In direct contrast to Spenser, Tennyson conceives life as a social problem. He reworks the old mass of legend, adding to it and

1 Shakespeare makes mention of Arthurian matter, but evidently does not regard it as suitable source.

2. Walter Scott voiced regret that Milton finally decided in favor of Biblical tradition rather than the chivalric.

subtracting from it, to show the meaning of life in the light of social reform. His is essentially the modern point of view, and try as we may to ignore it, there is a haunting pessimism about Tennyson's whole scheme. We feel that he tried to mask this tragic aspect of the utter hopelessness of spiritualizing the social order, of the Soul's ever vanquishing the Senses. In analysis we see that Tennyson's idea of this social reform which Arthur was attempting involved 1) the co-operation of man and woman, for Arthur feels that his Queen will be one with him, 2) the help of co-workers (Arthur's knights share his high ideal -- Arthur and his knighthood were "all one will"), 3) the Christian ideal, as shown not only by the blessing of this triple union by the high priest, but by the vows of the knights, "The King will follow Christ, and we the King." In the first Idyll this high consecration is established, but even in these opening stanzas we see the germ of disintegration, first in the unwillingness of the underlords to accept Arthur as rightful king and second, in the Queen herself who repeats her marriage vows with drooping eyes. Now this high order attracts splendid, idealistic young men, such as Gareth, who with all zeal start out to "follow the King," and become a civilizing force in the land. One of Arthur's first tasks is hearing disputes and granting settlements, helping the oppressed, ridding the land of evil.

The disintegration which soon sets in Tennyson attributed

indirectly to defects inherent in the knights themselves -- they were not quite equal to the high task set them by Arthur, and we see Geraint trying to do the work of the King with suspicion in his heart, unable to distinguish between the false and the true, and running off at the first hint of danger. Then following through, we find all the knights having some defect which disables them as worthy workers for the King: Balin is intellectually weak in trying to model his impetuous life on human example; Merlin, embodiment of constructive genius, is a prey to melancholy in the knowledge of the doom which awaits the Order; Pelleas represents the new recruits to the Order, depleted by the Holy Grail quest, who lack the fineness of the older knights and fail to make distinction between sensual and spiritual beauty; Tristram, that clever, bold worldling, who has outlived his ideals, "the wholesome madness of an hour;" Gawain, who in Tennyson loses all nobility of the earlier legend and becomes merely a frivolous, conceited, disloyal courtier, coming back from his short search for the Grail "much awearied of the Quest;" and Lancelot living his one great sin. And so this high Order, emanating from the beautiful idealism and lofty character of the King, whom Gladstone calls "the great pillar of moral order, and the resplendent top of human excellence," [1] goes

1 Memoirs, Vol ii, P. 130.

down in dissolution far from the accomplishment of its purpose. Dismal indeed is the picture in "The Last Tournament" when sin is openly admitted and the victor is Tristram who makes no effort to conceal his adultery with the Queen of Cornwall, and "Our one white day of Innocence hath past, Tho somewhat draggled at the skirt." [1]

Most critics have contended that Tennyson ends his poems with a note of hope, consistent with the dawn of the New Year. There is little that can be pointed out to prove this -- the new order, to which the old yields, is not even hinted at, for as we have noted, the younger knights were incapable and without leader. Arthur himself passes without laying any foundation for permanent good and in his last hours his mind is confused with doubt. He can find God in nature, "But in His ways with men I find Him not." [2] His reign is an utter failure and in this we can hear Tennyson voicing the pessimistic idea that all attempts at spiritual regeneration fail, the reforming of society is always an utterly hopeless task, resulting in death and confusion.

After this survey of the historical and literary background we are ready to examine recent products from Arthurian legend. But first let us briefly make some definitions and

1 The Last Tournament, lines 218 and 219.
2 The Passing of Arthur, line 11.

notice a few outstanding characteristics of present day literature.

For our purposes "contemporary literature" shall refer only to those works which have been published within the last ten or twelve years, and out of these we shall attend only to those which appear to us to be significant. For the most part mention of older versions of the legend shall refer to Malory's and Tennyson's, since these two are best known and most representative.

When viewed against the Arthurian background our contemporary literature is revealed in three rather glaring weaknesses. The first of these appears to me to be mediocrity of characters presented. This fault probably derives from the present embracing of the democratic tradition which has been in vogue since Wordsworth and has of late come to mean a devotion to the commonplace, even the vulgar. One might even suspect the earlier literary democrats of interest in their Peter Bells and their Leech-gatherers and their truncated beggars because of the subjective emotional value to the literary man, and not because of those characters' being worthy of literary treatment. Rather, they are more suitable to philanthropists than to writers. It is only in those works where we meet characters superior to ourselves, of some nobility, not superhuman at all, but with the elements of

greatness in them, that we, the ordinary readers, can find vision and that outlet which literature must afford. We are, deny it as we will, moulded by what we read, as is proved by the fashion of Byronic heroes. The unfortunate part of this is that often these heroes are not fit to be models. Is it worthy that we should become Lula Bett's or Babbett's simply because we cannot escape them in our reading? The obvious conclusion is that those noble characters of Arthurian legend are far more worthy literary material than much of that which goes into our contemporary writings.

The second great fault which appears when contemporary literature is subjected to the bright light of Arthurian legend is the miscalled naturalism. Contemporary naturalism bears small resemblance to that wholesome doctrine of the old Greeks but has come to suggest something unhealthy, common, inartistic. In revolting from the "artificial" in literature our naturalists have denied art, which is based more truly upon universal nature than naturalism itself. Our contemporary naturalism is largely mere vulgarity, a prying into the rat-holes of society. There is nothing squeamish or maudlin about Thomas Malory, yet the honesty which characterizes his work is not that which marks contemporary naturalism. So the revolt against Victorian and earlier sentimentalism has, like most revolts, gone too far and defeated its own purpose, in that instead of the unnaturalness of over-refinement and niceties we now have

unnaturalness of sensuality and vulgarity. Neither position, of course, attains that longed for "return to nature." Today we struggle to photograph in accurate, if monotonous, detail life "as it is," losing sight altogether of that higher truth which presents as a work of art the highlights and lowlights of life's universal element.

The third weakness of contemporary literature, as it appears to me, is inextricably linked with the two above; it is the requirement that books be of their own age exclusively. This obviously deprives literature of one of its highest purposes, to counteract current evil, and of one of its aspects of greatness, immortality, for a thing cannot be of one age and at the same time of all ages. Then, too, just as when one stands close to an oil painting he sees only a riot of daubs, so today's happenings when viewed today are distorted and clouded with emotional responses. Spenser recognizes this in choosing Arthur from a remote age, removed from personal envies.[1] Furthermore, we are so much at one with the past, so much of us <u>is</u> the past, that to divorce our thinking from that of the past is impossible. Therefore, we hope for an early recognition of those things which matter, whether they happened today or fourteen hundred years ago.

Among contemporary Arthurian literature we have selected for discussion only representative works of recognized authors since such works alone may be expected to have significant

1 See Spenser's letter to Raleigh quoted above on Page 12.

bearing on the great body of Arthurian legend. Those we shall use are Thomas Hardy's "Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall," Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Merlin," "Lancelot," and "Tristram," John Masefield's "Tristan and Isolt" and "Midsummer Night," Laurence Binyon's "Arthur," John Erskine's "Galahad," and Warwick Deeping's "Uther and Igraine," in that order.

CHAPTER II

THOMAS HARDY'S

"FAMOUS TRAGEDY OF THE QUEEN OF CORNWALL"

My ardors for emprize nigh lost
Since Life has bared its bones to me,
I shrink to seek a modern coast
Whose riper times have yet to be;
Where the new regions claim them free
From that long drip of human tears
Which peoples old in tragedy
Have left upon the centuried years.

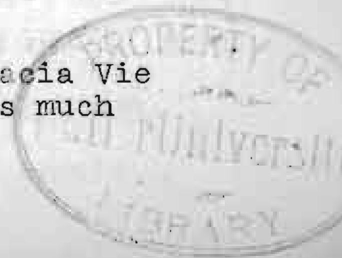
For, wonning in these ancient lands,
Enchased and lettered as a tomb,
And scored with prints of perished hands,
And chronicles with dates of doom,
Though my own Being bear no bloom
I trace such lives such scenes enshrine,
Give past exemplars present room,
And their experience count as mine.[1]

Thomas Hardy in his novels and much of his poetry has restricted himself to one locality and this particular locality, Wessex and its environs, was chosen not only for the author's personal attachment to it, but because it is so rich in tradition, the scene of so many years of human tragedy. Hardy evidences a great reverence and appreciation of old things. He seems sensitively aware of the enriching influence of the past. Once, it is said, Hardy refused an invitation to visit the United States because it was too new to have suffered enough visitations of fate. The richness of his vocabulary particularly is due to this interest in the past and his use of obsolete and unusual words seems especially appropriate to this subject of "chronicles with dates of doom."

1 Quoted by Carl Van Doren and Mark Van Doren in American & British Literature Since 1890, Page 145.

The "Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall" is another treatment of the familiar Tristram-Iseult legend, which has been a favorite with poets since Malory's time and before. It is, as the author says on the title page, "a new version of an old story arranged as a play for mummers." That Thomas Hardy who has created so many magnificent women should be attracted to these two Iseults, Iseult the Fair and Iseult the White-handed, is not at all surprising. Hardy, like several of the later poets, changes the early Iseult whose pure gold hair was her beauty into a more typical Irish beauty. In the stage directions we read, "Iseult has dark hair, and wears a crimson robe, and tiara or circlet." No doubt this Iseult is no less charming than the earlier pictures of her and yet there is something essentially modern about the dark-haired beauty. Even as late as Chaucer's time ideal beauty required golden hair and gray eyes; nearly all of Chaucer's ladies are blonde. On the other hand, especially for a stage production, it is most artistic to present this contrast between the two heroines, the one dark and the other fair, for everywhere the maid from Brittany is known as "The White." Hardy describes her as having "corn-brown hair" and wearing a white robe. It would be difficult to decide whether any symbolism is intended in this contrast, but such is suggested at times. We are reminded, too, of Hardy's love for "flame-color" [1] and vivid women. Here his

1 This term is used in describing the soul of Eustacia Vie in "The Return of the Native." In fact, there is much of Eustacia in this dark and stormy Queen.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sympathy is with her who wears the crimson robe, whom he calls "Briton's Helen."

The play purports to be one act, but throughout we have the smothered feeling of too much compression. The plan followed is Greek, much of the story being filled in by the Chanters, "shades of dead old Cornish men and women," the unities of time and of place being observed, in that the whole story takes place within the time of presentation, and all within the walls or within hearing of the Great Hall of Tintagel Castle. It is, of course, necessary then that the action should not begin until a point rather near the end as the story is most often handled; that is, Hardy begins after Tristram's marriage with Iseult of Brittany and after the Queen's attempt to visit him in his illness there. The preceding events necessary to an understanding of the story and those which are not presented on the stage are, as has been said, recounted by the Chanters and, also, by Merlin, who appears as Prologue and Epilogue. The first scene opens with the unheralded return of King Mark from a hunting trip, just after Iseult has returned from Brittany. He has discovered her absence and accuses her of having met Tristram, which accusation is apparently borne out by the fact that the little brachet, Tristram's gift to the Queen, is with her. She denies having seen her lover, after suffering her husband's insults, saying that he is dead. Mark refuses to believe this and hope is kindled for the Queen. Hardy uses the same character as Malory for the Queen's

confidante, Brangwain, and into her ear Iseult pours the story of her futile voyage to Brittany, the other Iseult having met her at the quay with the message that Tristram had been dead an hour. Brangwain is quick to the possibility of deception on the part of the Breton Iseult. Almost immediately a Messenger enters to tell the Queen that Tristram does indeed live and is close at hand, explaining the treachery of the pale Iseult. Tristram enters, disguised as an old harper, his traditional role. King Mark, on his way to the banquet hall, gives him only a careless glance and leaves the two lovers together. After the first embrace Iseult rebukes him for his marriage with another:

> "A woman's heart has room for one alone;
> A man's for two or three! "[1]

A watchman announces a ship in the harbor, a Breton ship with a white-attired figure near the prow. Soon Iseult the White-handed enters and pleads most pitifully with Tristram who berates her. The Queen enters unnoticed and listens restlessly. Finally she speaks to her lover's wife haughtily and cruelly. The other Iseult faints and is carried out, Tristram helping. When he returns the Queen is distant and bitter. Sir Andret, the Modred of this story, warns the King and the two enter unobserved. Iseult has a foreboding of evil and asks Tristram to leave before the King can discover him. He stays

1 Scene XI.

and sings of love to her. King Mark approaches and stabs Tristram in the back. Tristram, dying, recalls all he has done for Mark and for Cornwall, and when Andret upbraids him he reminds him of their old friendship until Andret is abashed. Iseult, as her lover dies, springs up, snatches Mark's own dagger from his belt and stabs him, then rushes out toward the sea. Brangwain re-enters with the word that Iseult has leaped into the sea, and, here Hardy shows himself a master of pathos in an otherwise rather melodramatic scene, in having the little hound, devoted to the last, jump with her. Iseult the White, also, has seen the Queen's death and says,

> "I heard her cry. I saw her leap! How fair
> She was! What wonder that my brother Kay
> Should pine for love of her.... O she should not
> Have done it to herself! Nor life nor death
> Is worth a special quest." [1]

This speech suggests in itself the opposite characters of the two Iseults. Merlin re-enters and brings the tragedy to a close. His lines here, I think, reveal Hardy's own attitude toward the play:

> "They were, in their long-faded sphere,
> As you are now who muse thereat;
> Their mirth, crimes, fear and love begat
> Your own, though thwart their ways;" [2]

Now, in what has Hardy followed the old legend and in

1 Scene XXI. 2 Epilogue.

what does this story differ? In the first place, the plot follows rather closely, including what is related by the Chanters as well as what takes place on the stage, after Malory. There is far more attention given to the character of Iseult the White-handed than appears in the older treatments, and on the whole it appears to me not to be entirely sympathetic. The Breton maiden seems a bit pale in character as well as complexion. She pleads too tearfully with her husband; we feel that she loses in dignity not only in following him to his mistress, but also in her abject devotion and self-bemeaning, for she says,

> "I'd rather be
> Her bondwench, if I am not good enough
> To be your wife, than not stay here at all,--" [1]

This is consistent, however, with her character, for we have already learned that she lacked nobility in her falsifying to Iseult the Queen about Tristram's death, "that cheat unmatchable." In spite of the Breton Iseult's having suffered great wrong, it is the other Iseult who wins our sympathy. Even in the tragedy at the end the Pale Iseult remains rather petulant and small. We feel that she begrudges the lovers their union in death and solaces her own grief with the thought that at least her husband is safe from the Queen:

"Well, well; she's lost him, even as have I."

1 Scene XIV.

And when she first views her husband's body she cries,

"My Tristram dead likewise? He one with her?"

And she clasps him as if to thwart his love even in death.

Hardy has changed more, then, than simply the color of the hair of "La Beale Isoud." [1] He has developed both Iseults in a fine contrast of appearance and character, with the weight of sympathy going to Iseult the Fair. This involves, I believe, Hardy's philosophy of Fate. He sees the beautiful Irish princess as the victim of her destiny as, also, is Tristram, whose very name forebodes sorrow.[2] It was not any fault of either that they loved -- there is none of the weakness or meanness of wrong love here -- they fell victim to a magic draught in nowise of their own intention and they were as helpless to overcome its power as they were to avoid falling prey to it.

> "Not of fore-aim or falseness, but by spell
> Of love-drink, ministered by hand unseen!" [3]

This is distinctly a Hardy-esque touch.

In lines quoted above[4] from Scene XXI of the play Iseult the White-handed refers to her brother Kay's devotion to the Queen. This incident is treated at some length in Malory and Hardy no doubt had the earlier work in mind when he inserted

1 Malory's "Morte Darthur," Book X.
2 Tristram's mother, dying at his birth, requested that he be christened with this "sad name."
3 Scene XI.
4 See page 26, quotation from Scene XXI.

these lines. In Malory, however, the affair starts when

> "At the first time that ever Sir Kehydius (who had accompanied Tristram to Cornwall) saw La Beale Isoud, he was so enamoured upon her that for very pure love he might never withdraw it. And at last, as ye shall hear or the book be ended, Sir Kehydius died for the love of La Beale Isoud." [1]

And in this account we see Tristram a little jealous and berating Isoud for answering out of pity the "love complaint" of the young knight.[1] Hardy evidently was familiar with this story and enriches his intense play with little side-interests like this.

Another interesting comparison which might be made between this and the earlier work is the opinion voiced by Lancelot of Tristram. In the earlier work the two knights are about equal in prowess, but Launcelot criticizes Tristram for marrying when he bore such a great love for the Queen, saying,

> "Fie upon him, untrue knight to his lady;
> That so noble a knight as Sir Tristram is,
> Should be found to his first lady false,
> La Beale Isoud, queen of Cornwall." [2]

They are mutual admirers and friends, however, and their love affairs and lives directly parallel each other, the one at Arthur's, the other at Mark's court. Hardy uses this bit of the old legend when he has Tristram warned by Lancelot of Mark's treachery, and in the same terms that Malory's Launcelot

1 Morte Darthur, Book IX, Chapter XVII.
2 Ibid., Book VIII, Chapter XXXVI.

uses. Tristram says, in Scene XI,

> "Yet told have I been by Sir Launcelot
> To ware me of King Mark! King Fox he calls him --"

Even the dying speech of Tristram to Andret shows Hardy's close following of Malory, who puts into Tristram's mouth the following words when Andred is about to kill him:

> "Fair lords, remember what I have done for the country of Cornwall, and in what jeopardy I have been in for the weal of you all. For when I fought for the truage of Cornwall with Sir Morhaus the good knight, I was promised for to be better rewarded, when ye all refused to take the battle;" [1]

And Andred's reply is,

> "Fie upon thee.... False traitor that thou art with thy vaunting, for all thy boasts thou shalt die this day." [1]

To which Tristram replies in almost the same words that Hardy gives him:

> "O Andred, Andred, ... thou shouldst be my kinsman, and now thou art to me full unfriendly, but and there were no more but thou and I, thou wouldst not put me to death." [1]

Compare with these older lines those of Hardy's hero.

> "Fair Knights, bethink ye what I've done for Cornwall,--
> Its fate was on my shoulder -- and I saved it! --
> Yea, thick in jeopardies I've thrust myself
> To fame your knighthood! -- daily stretched my arm
> For -- the weal -- of you -- all!" [2]

1 Malory's "Morte Darthur" Book VIII, Chapter XXXIV.
2 Scene XIX.

And his reproaches to Sir Andret:

> "O Andret, Andret; this from thee to me -
> Thee, whom I onetime held my fastest friend;
> Wert thou as I, I would not treat thee so!" [1]

There is a difference between the two treatments that is all the more remarkable because of their close similarity otherwise. In Malory Sir Tristram is at bay, pleading for life, and when he sees that Andred and his followers are not to be reasoned with he breaks his bond, fights with Andred, overcoming him, and escapes through a deserted chapel, flinging himself over a cliff, later to be rescued by his men. The modern Tristram, however, is uttering his dying rebuke and somehow he seems to lose in power when compared with Malory's hero, although he gains in pathos.

As to the usual chivalric elements Hardy does not follow the old tradition so closely. While all the older stories, especially Malory's, abound in tournaments and wars and combat of every sort, there is very little mention made here of any adventurous events. Mention is made by the Chanters in Scene VII of the great Irish Tournament where Tristram overcame Sir Palomides but it is in nowise connected directly with the plot. The tournament which played so large a part in earlier days has become archaic now even for historical drama. It indicates, moreover, the modern interest in woman and the love story,

1 Scene XIX

which is all-absorbing. While the love element was a part of chivalric tradition, it was always secondary to the adventure element. Hardy does keep the political aspect of the Arthurian romances, however, in that the court is here the centralizing factor. While the scenes are laid at Mark's court in Cornwall, his, we are told, is subservient to the great over-rule of Arthur. Thus the Chanters call Arthur "Our stainless Over-king of Counties -- he made Dux Bellorum for his valiancy."

CHAPTER III

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

> . . . .   Down through the gloom
> He gazed at nothing, save a moving blur
> Where foamed eternally on Cornish rocks
> The moan of Cornish water; and he asked,
> With a malignant inward voice of envy,
> How many scarred clod things that once had laughed
> And loved and wept and sung, and had been men,
> Might have been knocked and washed indifferently
> On that hard shore, and eaten gradually
> By competent quick fishes and large crabs
> And larger birds, not caring a wink which
> Might be employed on their spent images,
> No longer tortured there, if God was good,
> By memories of the fools and royal pimps
> That once unwittingly they might have been-- [1]

In Robinson's poems we find a blending of the old tradition with modern views similar to that in Hardy's, but no two interpretations will be identical. "Hardy," Amy Lowell says, "is the poet of evolution, Robinson of revolution." They both look upon life as a tragedy, but Hardy has more understanding, more serenity, and is, as Miss Lowell says, more reverent in dealing with his characters. Robinson, who is the more skillful as a poet, is more resistant to life and treats his characters with lively critical analysis. He has not the broad vision of Hardy, but in spite of this his poems are a far more significant treatment than Hardy's play.

Edwin Arlington Robinson, one of the more profound of the modern poets, has seen in the Arthurian stories, elements which have not appeared to other writers, and his reactions to them

1 From Robinson's Tristram.

reveal his own philosophy. Life appears to him a vast futility, as is suggested in the lines quoted above. All humanity is doomed individually to failure and blindness to its fate, not so much as with Hardy because life itself is a tragedy but because mankind has certain innate weaknesses that cause defeat in every purpose. In this Robinson follows the Greek belief that not circumstance but character determines fate. And yet there is no plea for sympathy, no complaining at this harshness of the general scheme of things; rather, the characters seem generally aware of their inevitable doom and silently, almost stoically, await it. Robinson shows the working of fate in the lives of individuals which, summed up, causes the downfall of the Order established by Arthur.

This philosophy accounts for the difference from the older poets, Malory presenting in various little glimpses the spectacular side of Arthurian life, with no emphasis at all upon character, but rather filling every page with action; Spenser giving scope to his ideal of beauty and the spiritual development of a perfect gentleman; and Tennyson portraying Arthur and his knights as social reformers, not as living human beings defeated by their own imperfections in a harsh and unfeeling world. Robinson, as we shall see particularly in "Tristram," is incapable of presenting the man-of-action who is Malory's hero. He is more similar in his conception of beauty and his interest in the spiritual nature of man to Spenser, although

the modern poet is interested more in the flaws in that nature which arrest its growth and cause the conflict than in the virtues man may acquire. And Robinson's modern intensity and psychological reality would no doubt have amazed and perturbed those Victorians who found in Arthurian matter elements suited to decorative verse and Arthur a medieval Albert, prince Consort.

This, then, is the approach Robinson takes to these old stories. Now let us take them up individually and see how he carries out this idea. The characters he chooses as title roles are significant in themselves, Merlin, Lancelot, Tristram, obviously the three persons connected with Arthur's court who had the greatest possibilities and whose failures, therefore, were the most profound. Merlin was the one man who might by his constructive intelligence and practical wisdom have saved the kingdom from the ruin which befell it, but he was destroyed by a mistaken love. Lancelot, who represented all that was fine and noble and strong, tries to save himself from moral dissolution by following the Grail, only to find it a will-o'-the-wisp. Tristram is doomed from birth to a ruinous love, and is the unwitting victim of a magic potion which binds him to love till death another's wife. The significant points, then, in Robinson's conception of these old legends are the inevitable failure which humanity must come to, the importance of love in a man's life and the impossibility of establishing any permanent high Order among men.

ROBINSON'S "MERLIN"

Let us take a very brief look at the earliest of these Arthurian poems by Robinson, which, indeed, is of an earlier date than would rightfully include it among our group, but which is essential to an adequate view of Robinson's interpretation of Arthurian legend.

"Merlin," like the "Morte Darthur," is a series of episodes but as a continuity, a whole, an epic, it is undirected and loosely constructed, almost inchoate. In this poem the author is interested in the struggle between love and what he chooses to call the "Light," between"woman and the Light that Galahad found." Merlin lives out the gospel of failure. He yields to Vivian although he sees his world crumbling about him and Arthur trying to rely upon him. The character of Vivian is, strangely enough, the more finely drawn of the two; she is stronger than Merlin, just as we shall later see Guinevere more clearly and as a stronger personality than Lancelot. In the main Robinson is true to the old tradition but interprets it in an essentially modern andRobinsonian manner.

ROBINSON'S "LANCELOT"

With Lancelot we come to an entirely different type of hero, but one who is involved in the same conflict as Merlin. He is not the great intelligence that Merlin was. He represents rather the vigorous, loyal, courageous man, who realizes his own weaknesses and tries honestly to overcome them, but is doomed beforehand to failure, and, worse than failure, to the realization that he is going to fail and of all that that failure will entail, "Who sees the new and cannot leave the old."

The story opens after Lancelot has returned from the quest of the Holy Grail and in spite of his highest resolve has again fallen under the spell of the Queen, "This pale witch-wonder of white fire and gold." Rumours are abroad, started by Modred, enemy of Arthur and all that is noble of purpose, that Lancelot realizes will place the Queen in decided ill repute. He also sees that if he stays at Camelot their great love will not lessen and "that infernal foul attendant," Modred, will at last spy upon them at some time when he can actually report to the King their betrayal. Lancelot is resolved, therefore, to exile himself, following the Light which will make him free. This he tells the Queen. She cannot let him go, but entreats him to stay with her one night more, for the King is gone hunting. Seeing clearly what he is doing, and yet unable to do otherwise, his love struggling to overcome the Light and succeeding,

Lancelot remains. The King returns before midnight, his trip having been a ruse planned by his friends, and makes the discovery which is to plunge the whole kingdom into the bloodiest of civil wars. He orders the lovers burned, but before his order can be carried out Lancelot frees himself, and, gathering a band of his friends, carries off the Queen just as the flame is licking at the first faggot. In the rescue, however, he unintentionally kills Gawain's two brothers, Gaheris and Gareth, his truest friend. There is a rather pathetic passage where we see the impotence and tragedy of King Arthur's life. He is in a half-stupor at the whole horror and visualizes the burning of his Queen which is in accordance with the Law, his own creation. This passage contains some exquisite poetry.

Lancelot, escaping with the Queen, goes to Joyous Gard, where, the poet reminds us Tristram and Isolt "of old" spent so many happy hours. Arthur, goaded by Gawain, who is almost mad with grief at his double loss, lays seige to the castle. It is a long and dreary war with many deaths on both sides. Lancelot is urged by his loyal friend Bors and by Guenevere to put an end to the bloodshed by having Arthur and Gawain killed. Lancelot, of course, is too alive to his old loyalty and his friendliness with Gawain and, also, to the great wrong he has done both to consent to any foul means of ending the war. That very day, however, envoys from Rome bring a decree that the Queen must be returned to Camelot within a

week and that she may expect full mercy from the King. She entreats Lancelot to take her to France, anywhere, even to kill her, rather than send her back to that living death, but he believes his duty lies in giving her up, and relies on the King's promise of mercy, and within the week

> "With a cavalcade of silent men and women,
> The Queen rode into Camelot, where the King was,
> And Lancelot rode grimly at her side."

And Lancelot rides away from Camelot banished, realizing that in spite of his compliance with the demand to return the Queen the long war will be carried on, due to "the storm in Gawain's eyes." So indeed, the war follows him and his men to France. At last a letter comes from Gawain declaring a truce. Lancelot goes to his camp and finds his enemy dying and Arthur already on his way back to defend his crown against Modred. Gawain, dying, clearly visions what is to be and tells Lancelot that he must go to help Arthur. So Lancelot stays with Gawain until he is dead and then, after recruiting allies, embarks for England to help the weary King in a lost cause.

> "and they all went to Dover,
> Where the white cliffs were ghostlike in the dawn,
> And after dawn were deathlike. For the word
> Of the dead King's last battle chilled the sea
> Before a sail was down ....
> .... There were tales told of a ship."

Nowhere in the poem is the tragic futility of men's lives so clearly shown as here where Lancelot, readily forgetting his grudge, goes to fight for his King, only to arrive too late.

It is interesting to note the casual mention of the passing of Arthur,a complete disregarding of the supernatural element which is given such a large place with the older poets.

Lancelot goes on alone to search for the Queen and finds her after a while at Almesbury. Here is another modern touch, the cold indifference of nature to the sufferings of men.

> "Thrushes, indifferent in their loyalty
> To Arthur dead and to Pan never dead,
> Sang as if all were now as all had been."

The real Guenevere is gone though a calm "Alcestis-like" sister without the gold that was the Queen is there to greet Lancelot and send him away.

> "No, Lancelot;
> We are going by two roads to the same end;
>
> ....
> Why the new world is not for you and me,
> I cannot say; but only one was ours.
> I think we must have lived in our one world
> All that earth had for us."

Here is no weak regret for what has been, only an unvoiced sorrow for what may not be. When Lancelot suggests that he take her to France she reminds him of the arguments he once used when she suggested that course, but without pettiness or revenge, only great sadness was in her words. And then the cloister bell rings and Lancelot must go.

> "He crushed her cold white hands and saw them falling
> Away from him like flowers into a grave."

And we do indeed feel that both Guenevere and Lancelot and all the old Order are falling like flowers into the grave. For, "the world has paid too much for Camelot" and Lancelot, going away from Almesbury, sees a world that was not Arthur's, and a voice from within him says,

> "Where the Light falls, death falls; a world has died
> For you, that a world may live. There is no peace.
> Be glad no man or woman bears for ever.
> The burden of first days. There is no peace."

And he rides on, alone in the night, with that still white face, the memory of Guenevere, before him, until at last it fades and is gone, and then appears the face of Galahad "who had seen and died and was alive, now in a mist of gold." There comes a blackness as he rides on alone until "in the darkness came the Light."

As to the mere story Robinson has followed fairly closely the old legend and has treated it with the grandeur and simplicity that is great tragedy. In some measure he has developed the suggestion of the last Idylls of the King -- it is the suggestion of human futility and the hopelessness of ever establishing a high Order among men. However, this despair pervades the whole of Robinson's poem, starting even at the first sight of the tragic queen whose bright gold is shadowed by the oak leaves, and with the foreboding that comes in the first pages that

> "Some far-off unheard-of retribution
> Hangs over Camelot, even as this oak-bough,
> That I may almost reach, hangs overhead,
> All dark now. Only a small time ago
> The light was falling through it, and on me."

This impending doom hangs over the whole poem until at last the calamity falls, and Lancelot is left to ride alone through the darkness.

Robinson has taken the deeper meaning of the Grail legend and superimposed it upon the Lancelot-Guenevere story until the two are mutually dependent and each is the explanation of the other. Lancelot's love causes him to follow the gleam, along with the other knights, and he is more successful than any save his own son, Galahad, who, seeing the Light, loses all earthly qualities. Lancelot returns from his quest but he has seen enough to keep him dissatisfied with the Old Order[1] and with his revived feeling for the Queen. Guenevere has realized the disintegrating effect of that Grail quest upon the court:

> "I knew it coming for a longer time
> Than you fared for the Grail. You told yourself,
> When first that wild light came to make men mad
> Round Arthur's Table -- as Gawain told himself,
> And many another tired man told himself --
> That it was God, not something new, that called you.
> Well, God was something new to most of them,
> And so they went away."

Lancelot's fate, then, lies in the fact not that he failed to see the Light that Galahad saw, but that he did see a glimmer

1 In the Idylls of the King (The Holy Grail) this ill effect of the Grail quest is suggested.

of it and this glimmer made life a wilder mystery than before; it does not make him free from earth's illusion as it did Galahad, but, seen veiled as Lancelot saw it, it works unutterable discontent in his life. He saw too much or not enough. As Guenevere tells him,

> "The Light you saw
> Was not for this poor crumbling realm of Arthur,
> Nor more for Rome; but for another State
> That shall be neither Rome nor Camelot,
> Nor one that we may name."

And later she says, trying to persuade him to end the war with Arthur:

> "Nor do I wholly find an answer now
> In any shine of any far-off Light
> You may have seen. Knowing the world you know
> How surely and how indifferently that Light
> Shall burn through many a war that is to be,
> To which this war were no more than a smear
> On circumstance."

But even Guenevere's uncanny insight cannot quite penetrate the mystery effected in men's lives by the Grail. Robinson does not end, as Tennyson does, with Lancelot going to a monastery, but suggests that after a lonely night of darkness in which the memory of the Queen's white face gradually grows dimmer and is lost, Lancelot at last comes into the Light.

> "... There were no more faces. There was nothing.
> But always in the darkness he rode on,
> Alone; and in the darkness came the Light."

With this suggestion the poem ends.

It will be evident from this discussion that the same theme which unifies "Merlin" is present here -- the antagonism between love and the Light -- and, as in "Merlin," the woman character is stronger. Guenevere is the intuitive intellect; she has the clearer insight and is a clearer personality than Lancelot, for, sympathize with him as we may, we must see that he oscillates between his passion for the Queen and the Light of which he has caught only a gleam. He cannot quite conquer himself and, yielding to his less noble motives once too often and putting off his following of the Light, he brings disaster to himself, to Arthur, to Guenevere, and to the whole Order. "The hopeless fate of Arthur," as Miss Lowell says, "lies not in the dead on the battle fields, nor in his chamber where he and Bedivere and Gawaine await the first stroke of what they all know is their doom, nor in the dying Gawaine's conversation with Lancelot, but it is in the meeting of Lancelot and Guenevere in the garden and later before the fire at Joyous Gard." So again we see the high Order doomed to failure through the weakness of its component parts.

An interesting new note is the frequent prophecy of a time when there will be no more kings. One might almost say that the revolutionary spirit was awake even in Camelot. Lancelot says,

"What are kings?
And how much longer are there to be kings?
When are the millions who are now like worms
To know that worms are worms, if they are worms?"

This seems to be not quite justifiable in view of the great service which Arthur is even in this poem said to have done for civilization in spite of his ultimate failure. No doubt the people would have been even more unhappy "worms" than they were without his civilizing genius.

High points of this interpretation of a combination of two of our old legends are, I think, a profound, suggestive study of the Grail and its effect upon Lancelot and upon the Order in general, a new and more powerful Guenevere, the prophecy of a time when there will be no kings, the futility of all humanity, even the blameless King, and the realization that a doom overhangs Camelot.

ROBINSON'S "TRISTRAM"

With the third of the great Arthurian heroes treated by Robinson we have a shifting of the political center from Camelot to Cornwall, as in Hardy's play. However, Camelot is woven into the story and the knights from Arthur's court enter into the story, Lancelot and Gawaine particularly. The same imminent doom which we found in "Merlin" and "Lancelot" casts its sinister shadow over this story and humanity again is doomed to failure and futility. Fate is even more prominently instrumental here than before, as will be seen in the following synopsis of the story.

In contrast to Hardy's treatment of the same theme, Robinson opens his story with Isolt of Brittany, she of the white hands. She is gazing northward over the blank ocean, waiting for the return of Tristram, who had given the child an agate and a thoughtless promise to come back. Her father, King Howel, teases and argues more seriously with her, but she stubbornly holds to the belief that Tristram will remember his promise. The scene then shifts to Cornwall where the moon glimmers cold on the festival arranged by King Mark in celebration of his wedding night. Tristram, alone on the stairs that lead from the castle to the sea, thinks of the events which have made this the most bitter night of his life; how he brought Isolt of Ireland to his uncle, blind to her love for him until his word was given to Mark. Morgan, with her

feline face, comes to summon him back to the feasting. He is impervious to her wiles and is again left alone to brood over his fate and Isolt's. At last she comes to him, leaving the faithful Brangwaine to guard, and they are together for a few last moments. Andred plays here the same sneaking traitor that Hardy makes him, following Isolt and, discovered by Tristram, suffers a severe beating, but not before he has called Mark. Tristram is dazed by anger, tortured by the fate which overhangs Isolt, and insults the King who then banishes him. There follows a long period of several days during which he wanders half-mad throughout the surrounding woods until Morgan the Queen finds him and virtually takes him prisoner. At last, seeing that he is oblivious to her charms, she lets him go away with his faithful old friend, Gouvernail. In his desolation Tristram remembers the peaceful days long ago spent in Brittany with King Howel and his child, "whose innocence may teach me to be wise." So to this old friendliness he returns, only to find the Breton King hard set to defend himself against a certain Griffon and other enemies. This is a boon to Tristram who immediately sets out to restore security in his friend's realm. But at last all the marauders are subdued and Tristram comes back to the court where the white Isolt still waited.

> "He knew that while his life was in Cornwall,
> Something of this white fire and loneliness
> In Brittany must be his whereon to lavish
> The comfort of kind lies while he should live."

And so Tristram takes the child, who yet is woman, for his wife and lives for a while in a sad kind of pleasure. Then one day a gay ship sails into the harbor and Gawaine, far famed for his frivolity, comes to take Tristram to be made a knight of the Round Table. Isolt with that keen vision which makes her half-seer realizes that he will never come back and the afternoon before he leaves is bitter and angry, but he sails away seeing her smile and wave, "that all should see her smiling when he sailed away from her." The knighting is but a short process and Lancelot takes his friend to his castle by the sea, Joyous Gard. There, due to Guinevere's impulsive plan, Isolt of Ireland has been brought, her villain husband being incarcerated at the time. A period of ecstatic happiness follows throughout the long summer while the White Isolt is watching again for a ship from the north and then, one day, while Tristram is out in the woods, Mark comes and carries his Queen back to Cornwall. Tristram again sinks half into insanity until he is awakened by a sneering letter from Morgan, who, half-glad at the sorrow of this man who spurned her, writes that Queen Isolt is dying. Tristram goes at once and is amazed when he reaches Tintagel to find all the gates open and no guards to hinder his entering. Isolt is waiting for him. She says,

> "Mark has been good to me today --
> So good that I might almost think him sorry
> That he is Mark, and must be always Mark.
> May we be sorry to be ourselves, I wonder?
> I am not so, Tristram. You are not so.
> Is there then much to sigh for?

These, we remember, are almost the very words of Guinevere when she is taking her farewell of Lancelot; no complaining at what might seem a cruel fate, only a clear realization of the fulness of life and a sadness at failure. And so Mark leaves the two alone with death and the sea which has never before been so calm. It is not Mark, in this version, but snake-like Andred who creeps upon the lovers and kills Tristram over the body of Isolt. Mark, coming in too late to prevent, says to the murderer,

> "I am not sure that you have not done well.
> God knows what you have done. I do not know.
> There was no more for them -- and this is peace."

Just as every craftsman leaves his own stamp impressed upon his work, so may we see the touch of this poet upon the characters he has re-created. Lancelot and Guinevere were not identical with their earlier counterparts; no more are Tristram and Isolt. Whereas in Malory Tristram is simply the typical chivalric knight, master huntsman and hawker, "harper passing all other," rather fierce and, like most knights, in the service of a lady, it is Tristram the lover that Robinson uses for his story. And yet it is not even Tristram the lover, alone, for this would not be a new treatment, but Tristram the lover who is also another example of human futility. He, like Lancelot and Merlin, is connected with the court of Arthur and he does

less than either of them to promote the Order, leaving Camelot immediately after being knighted. Yet Tristram is no weakling; Malory places him second only to Lancelot and Robinson evidently follows this. His deeds in Brittany would deny any lack of valor. He is the pawn of Fate and doomed at birth to sadness. He is worthy tragic hero, but like Lancelot and Merlin he is not so strong as the women characters. He feels and thinks but he does not act. He is something of a weaker Hamlet, less dynamic and even more introspective.

Robinson treats with equal sympathy the two Isolts and, whereas in Malory "La beale Isoud" is briefly described as the "fayrest mayde and lady in the world," Robinson devotes many passages of lovely description to the two heroines and, like Hardy, makes the Queen a dark beauty.

> "Isolt -- Isolt of the dark eyes -- Isolt
> Of the patrician passionate helplessness --
> Isolt of the soft waving blue-black hair --
> Isolt of Ireland --"

She is more royal than Guinevere and a greater lover. There is never an instance where she is petulant or small. She has a passive strength that amounts almost to stoicism. Always composed and dignified, she never appears to disadvantage. She is even able to chill the senile ardors of her husband with her "candid and exact abhorrence." The oth r Isolt "half childlike and half womanly" has the strength of frailty. She is compounded of a warmth and whiteness, as Gawaine says, and

her hair is a nameless color, whiter than gold, her eyes gray and clear. There is something of theCassandra about her. However, we feel that she lacks something of the serenity of the other Isolt, at least once, on that afternoon when she shows the tiger side of her nature when she foresaw that Tristram would never return to her from Camelot. She gives without asking anything in return, except for this one outbreak, a lovely character, hopeless and pathetic.from the start.

Robinson's King Mark is also a more subtle character than he has appeared before, and more finely drawn. In Malory, as we have noticed above,[3] Mark is the absolute villain, traitor and coward, "King Fox," the "shamefullest king that liveth, and a great enemy to all good knights." Tennyson takes the same conception of Mark, in less vigorous language. When Mark seeks to become a knight of the Round Table he is scornfully rejected by Arthur because he bore "A name of evil savor in the land" and "hath tarnish'd the great name of king as Mark would sully the low state of churl." [1] He is "a man of plots, craft, poisonous counsels, wayside ambushings," the man who slips up behind Tristram to kill him:

> "Behind him rose a shadow and a shriek --
> 'Mark's way,' said Mark, and clove him thro' the brain." [2]

This is at best melodramatic and stage-y. We feel that Tennyson has not dealt fairly with Mark nor any more so with Tristram, who is openly and confessedly immoral, nor Isolt who

1 See "Gareth and Lunette."
2 See "The Last Tournament."
3 See Page 30.

becomes a mere wanton -- they are all cheapened in accordance with the Victorian rigidity.

Robinson treats all three more fairly, even Mark. We find the same struggle in him that appears to an infinitely greater extent in Lancelot. Mark has worthy motives, and at last he acts upon them, when he ceases to combat Fate and allows Tristram to be with Isolt at her death. We feel that he has at last conquered his ignobility. He reviews with profound sadness his life, his only comment being, "If I had only known." And yet as he is saying this the thought comes to him that even if he had had the insight which is his at the last he might not have lived up to it. The theme of human weakness leading to calamity is evident, then, even in the minor characters.

Now let us see how our poet uses these characters to enact his theme, similar to the one which ran through "Lancelot," the overthrow of Order due to certain forces at work within men's lives which render futile all human strivings after good.

When Tristram is going to be made a knight of the Round Table, "so long the symbol of a world in order," we are reminded that it will soon be overthrown by "love and fate and loyalty forsworn." This phrase, if nothing else, connects the two poems as to theme. Robinson sees in the two great Arthurian love stories identical forces at work, and in treating them

reveals his own philosophy. While there is not a close similarity between Mark's rule and Arthur's we are led to believe that they at least have order in common, and that they both fall because of the same disintegrating forces.

The first of these great forces which work in men's lives to bring about their doom is, according to Robinson, love. Here it is Tristram's fate to love Isolt with a love which can never enjoy fulfillment except in death. And yet the poet would have us feel that the lovers' lives are not cut short. He reminds us time after time that Tristram and Isolt are not for old age, that they have lived to the full and that in death they find a peace which could never have been theirs in life. Isolt is particularly aware that she will never grow old. A "little watchman" in her keeps reminding that Time is bringing death close. And yet their love is greater than life and death. Just as was the case with Lancelot, however, the very greatness of love prevents an able knight from working for the Order. Tristram thus stays at Camelot only long enough to receive his order and to become a knight of the Round Table, and we have no mention of his ever doing anything to build up or defend Arthur's Order just as Lancelot was prevented from helping at the time of greatest need.

The second of these disintegrating forces is that same fatalism and impending doom which we noticed in "Lancelot." The older poets and many of the moderns who have treated this subject have accounted for the tragic love affair supernatur-

ally in the magic love-potion which the two lovers drank unwittingly, but Robinson is essentially a modern and scorns any such device, making the cause a far deeper one, namely Destiny, which has shadowed Tristram's life always. He was predestined to tragic love, "born for sorrow of an unguarded and forgotten mother," and could not have avoided it. Gouvernail tells him at one time,

> "Time is a casket
> Wherein our days are covered certainties
> That we lift out of it, one after one,
> For what the day may tell."

This fatalism is a distinct innovation from the older treatments of the same legend and, it seems to me, lends it a depth and high seriousness fitting to the tragedy. Fate becomes a sort of magnified Evil which contends with and at some times overpowers God. Mark, brooding over the double tragedy, says,

> "If I were the world's maker
> I should say fate was mightier than I was,
> Who made these two that are so silent now,
> And for an end like this ....
> .... There are some ills and evils
> Awaiting us that God could not invent .....
> That only fate's worst fumbling in the dark
> Could have arranged so well."

The third great force which worked for the disintegration of order and civilization is "loyalty forsworn." One of the vows of chivalry was, of course, honor and loyalty. This included loyalty to the church, the King, and the lady love. Except for the crusaders loyalty to the church became mere

formality. Loyalty to the King meant primarily military service on quests, battlefield and wherever the cause of the King needed support. We have evidence of this in Tristram's deeds in Cornwall to guarantee his Uncle's authority. It was, indeed, while he was engaged in the King's service that he killed Morhaus, Isolt's kinsman, and was himself wounded in such a manner that only Isolt's strange power could heal him. Then later this knight-at-arms pledges fealty to that other king, Howel, father of the White Isolt, and by his valiant leadership rids the land of bandits and marauders. It is in recognition of these and other brave deeds that Tristram is made Knight of the Table Round. Robinson reminds us in his subtle, suggestive way, however, that when loyalty is forsworn it is just as much a power for evil as it has been for good. Lancelot, in spite of his better intentions, forswears his loyalty to the King, and it is this denial that not only brings his own ruin, but is largely responsible for the downfall of the whole Order. So Tristram, having bound himself prematurely to King Mark's service, is honor bound to carry out his promise, even though it is worse than death. Later, when he forewears his loyalty, he precipitates death for himself, although in breaking his loyalty to that villain-King we feel that he does the only thing he could with honor do, and, as Robinson reminds us, his sin is not so much sin as it is fate. These three elements of the tragedy, love, fate and loyalty forsworn, are an entirely new analysis of the old situation

and have not been so clearly brought out in any former treatment.

Another essentially modern touch noticeable in this poem, is the harsh indifference of nature to human suffering. In the older versions there is little attention to nature in any way whatsoever, with the possible exception of that one charming little essay on Guinevere's Maying expedition in Malory.[1] With the nineteenth century poets there is considerable nature treatment, but simply as background. While Robinson does keep a very distinct background of nature, the moan of Cornish water that foamed eternally on Cornish rocks, there is, I believe, a more significant use of nature, which belongs essentially to the moderns. The passage quoted at the beginning of this section illustrates very well this modern attitude toward nature. There is something of the same idea in Hardy, although it is not so extensively developed as here. While Tristram is wandering away from Tintagel after Mark has banished him, the rain is beating down upon him, and he broods,

> "..sin stronger than fate, sin that had made
> The world for love -- so that the stars in heaven
> Might laugh at it, and the moon hide from it,
> And the rain fall on it."

In conclusion, Robinson has produced what is probably the greatest modern version in English of the famous old legend which has been a "best seller" from the time of Malory. Herbert S. Gorman says that this version "immediately super-

1 Book XVIII, Chapter XXV.

sedes all other variants of the legend ..... and this statement is frankly made in the faces of Swinburne, Matthew Arnold, Tennyson, Arthur Symons and Thomas Hardy, to name but the more prominent poets in the English language who have handled the story." [1] In speaking of the various successive treatments Arthurian stories have had, Arthur W.Colton says, "Their latest experience under Robinson must be to their epic consciousness unique, at any rate refreshing..... They have taken on a substantial and veined humanity lost for many centuries." [2] Mr. Van Doren is convinced that it "is the best in English since the Middle Ages." Mr. Percy M. Hutchison says, "And it is not too much to say that the Tristram of Edwin Arlington Robinson may be placed first among all versions of the ancient tale." [3] We may be safe in saying, then, that in this careful imposing of modern introspection, questioning, irony, and modern psychology into the medieval story of love and sorrow, Robinson has succeeded in proving again the adaptability of our Arthurian legend, based as it is on the unchangeable element of mortal passion. He skillfully meets the demands of our times for rationality, and intellectualized passion and as a result has produced a tragedy which is almost exclusively of the mind.

1 From the New York Evening Post Literary Review, May 7, 1927.
2 From the Literary Review, June 23, 1927.
3 From the New York Times Book Review, May 1927.

CHAPTER IV

JOHN MASEFIELD

MASEFIELD'S "TRISTAN AND ISOLT"

It has been unfortunate that "Tristan and Isolt," by John Masefield, should have been published in America so soon after Robinson's "Tristram." While Mr. Masefield's play in verse was produced at Bayswater first on February 21, 1927, it was not published in America until October of the same year, while "Tristram" had gone through several reprintings by that time.[1] The inevitable comparison has not been favorable to the English poet, either as to poetic quality or as to handling of the subject itself. It is regrettable, also, that one who is especially adept in narrative verse should turn to another form not so well suited to the story, nor, we feel, to the poet's own genius, and a form which has tempted more than one with unsuccessful results, the drama in verse.

Mr. Masefield's play opens with the young Tristan[2] and his foster-father, Dinan, but recently landed on the shores of Cornwall, which is under the oppressive rule of Kolbein, a pirate. Dinan tells Tristan how this Kolbein, some twenty years before killed King Meirchyon and seized his young son, Marc, as hostage and would have killed the daughter, Olwen,

1 It was reprinted in April 1927; May 1927, four times; June, 1927, three times.

2 In stage directions at the end of the play Mr. Masefield gives Tristan's age as twenty, Isolt's the same, Marc's twenty-nine, Arthur's forty-five.

except that she was rescued and married by King Tallorc. Kolbein and Marc enter, the former demanding a new tribute of thirty sons of Cornish nobles. Marc valiantly refuses; Kolbein leaves him to reconsider. Dinan then reveals to Tristan that he is of royal birth, the son of Olwen and Tallorc, and Marc is, therefore, his uncle. When Kolbein comes back to insult Marc anew Tristan challenges him to fight. Kolbein is reluctant to fight this son of the woman he loved, but Tristan mortally wounds Kolbein in that fight of "wisdom against man's youth" in which, as Kolbein says, "youth has the luck," but before the old warrior dies he makes Marc swear to unite the two kingdoms, Cornwall and Kolbein's Irish fief, by marrying Isolt, his daughter. Then he has Tristan swear that he will accompany his body back to Ireland and bring Isolt to Marc. This Tristan swears and Kolbein, with a lusty salutation to the dead, dies "standing up." Tristan immediately sets sail for Ireland and is greeted there by Thurid, Kolbein's widow, and Isolt, who welcome him, for, Thurid tells him,

> "You have freed me from the beast who murdered
> my lover.
> My girl's best thanks: you have freed her from
> the threat
> Of the lust of his pirate friend. We take you
> to friendship."

Isolt then accepts Marc's offer, although she hesitates because of the hatred she knows will be hers as a "foreign queen" and because of the ambiguous prophecy of her mother

as to the fate which awaits her. The mother prepares a magic love-potion which Isolt and Marc are to drink on their wedding night. This she entrusts to Brangwen, Isolt's waiting-maid, who is to accompany her. On the ship, however, Tristan and Isolt are irresistibly attracted to each other and pledge their love in the magic wine, not knowing its power. This is not of great significance, however, except to fan the flame that was already burning, for before ever tasting the philter the two have declared their love for each other.

The scene shifts to Tintagel again. Arthur, who is the dux bellorum of history and not the great over-King that Robinson makes him, is preparing to set out just after Marc's wedding to Isolt. Tristan has been absent at the ceremony, but appears seeking Isolt soon after. Kai, an old courtier, officious and domineering, tries to stop him, but he goes on to the new Queen's chamber. Kai suspects their affair, but Isolt sends him away. At last the two lovers hit upon the ruse of sending Brangwen to the marriage bed where Tristan has been commanded to serve the love-philter. The scheme is successful for the two lovers, but Brangwen is so nervous that after drinking her share of the potion she spills the rest, so that all that is left for Marc is the dregs which contain the sleeping powder Isolt had put into the wine to insure Marc's ignorance of the deception. The lovers have one more night for themselves.

The next episode takes place a week after the wedding. Marc has been apprised of his Queen's infidelity and consents to a ruse suggested by Kai and Bedwyr, another courtier. The king is to leave on a hunting trip and return unexpectedly, the same device that is used in the Lancelot Guinevere story. Tristan learns of the trap and sends Hog the Swineherd to warn the Queen not to return to the palace as they had planned, but in order to get Hog to leave his charge, for he has been promised his freedom if he can keep the King's swine for a year without loss, and this is the last night of the year, Tristan must promise to stay on guard himself at the pig sties until Hog can return. Kai and Bedwyr learn of this scheme and in turn plot to lure Tristan away and steal a pig, thus humiliating the young knight before the King. The plotters have called on Arthur to help them, representing the whole affair to him as a lark. It is through his warning hint that Tristan is able to see through the various deceptions and finally to capture the two old courtiers as they try to rob the sties. It is Arthur who rides to meet Marc and tell him of the commotion at the pig sties and Kai and Bedwyr are exposed in their ludicrous and ignominious trick and soundly berated by the king. Marc, however, has seen enough to realize Tristan's guilt and banishes him. He appears the next day, however, disguised as a harper and begs Isolt to come away with him. He has not deceived the watchful Kai who has set guards to watch for Tristan

and sprinkled rye-meal on the window ledge to trap him by his footsteps in the Queen's room. The King, Kai, Bedwyr and Arthur wait outside ready to force their way in. Arthur, refusing to be a party to this scheme to trap a lady, shouts a warning to the lovers so that Tristan has disappeared by the time the door is opened. However, his white footprints betray him. Marc demands that Isolt drink the "water of test" to prove her innocence. Again Arthur intervenes to try to settle it more calmly, but Isolt says,

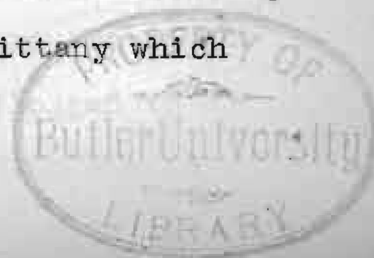
> "I am as may-blossom in a flood,
> Or straw in flames; but when the flood has run to sea
> And the flames burnt out, I may be mended or ended."

She prefers to drink the poison, believing it is "safer to be in God's hand than in man's." As she is ready to drink, however, Tristan enters, defies any to stop him and carries off Isolt, but not before she has publicly declared herself his.

The next scene is in the forest where Tristan and Isolt are wandering. Dinan comes to beg Tristan to return to his own kingdom where his people need his leadership against the heathen, but he refuses and Dinan declares that the people will then cast him out and choose another king. Dinan goes to Marc, the reason for his going not being made clear, and tells him where the lovers are. Marc finds them sleeping with a drawn sword between them and lays his glove beside it. When Isolt wakes and sees that Marc has been there and left them unharmed

she is moved by his magnanimity to renounce Tristan and return to her husband, who receives her with welcome and restores her as the Queen. Marc is then off to fight with Arthur at Badon Hill and is killed in the battle. Tristan wanders in the forest mad. He comes at last to Tintagel just as the messengers with word of Marc's death arrive. Isolt becomes almost unhuman and has her lover flogged until he is carried away dying. She then learns of her husband's death and goes to find Tristan. He is still alive when she comes to him and apparently forgives her. As he dies she stabs herself that they may go into the unknown together. Arthur comes in again at the end with a sort of benediction upon their lives and to attend to their burial.

We have already suggested the immortality of these legends, and, logically speaking, it would seem impossible to harm an immortal. Nevertheless, we come away from the reading of this play with the sense that somehow an old friend has suffered injury. Certainly it has been the privilege of poets throughout the ages to take liberties with these old traditions and they have become more or less open ground. Still, for the most part, those liberties taken have been generally in keeping with the spirit of the legend and have added to its interest. Mr. Masefield has disregarded so much of the valuable raw material here, however, that he loses much of the significance and beauty of the story. Where is that lovely episode in Brittany which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has been proved worthy by so many great literary artists? The omission can hardly be blamed on the compression necessary to a stage play for that rule is not observed elsewhere in the play;-- the action begins with the Kolbein incident, chronologically preceding the Brittany incidents by several years in the older version.

The introduction of the swineherd and his various connections and the involving of Tristan in his pigsty escapade can hardly be said to add to the beauty or dignity of the old legend. Nor, somehow, does this low comedy element mix. It does not succeed in relieving the intensity of the drama, although there are some ludicrous situations and humorous dialogues. Nor is there any distinct purpose in killing Marc off at the end of the story. We are immediately reminded of Robinson's Mark, chastened by sorrow and grieving over fate, a far more fitting conclusion than this. The very marrow of the story has always been, and deservedly so, the great love of Tristan and Isolt, so that when Mr. Masefield has Isolt renounce her lover (although she has chosen to go off with him and even preferred death to a life without him when she prepared to drink the poison ordeal) and penitently returned to her husband who would have been her murderer but for Tristan's intervention, not only is the heart taken out of the story but inconsistencies of character become obvious. This weakening of the main element of the story is continued when Isolt brutally orders her erstwhile lover flogged to death. Even though she rushes to him and dies with him we

cannot forgive her changeable and unreasonable action.

We have noticed these changes in the plot. Now let us turn to the interpretation of the characters. Tristan, we feel, loses least in this treatment. He is a valiant fighter, although it is almost too improbable that a twenty year old boy should overthrow a seasoned old pirate like Kolbein, and he appears as of old in the guise of a harper. However, we have no very definite picture of Tristan; he remains rather nebulous and hazy, somewhat of a tragic type and not a vivid personality. Isolt is decidedly more distinct. She is a little minx, changeable, petulant and inconsistent. She falls in love with Tristan at first sight but when he pleads with her at Tintagal to escape with him to his boat which waits outside the harbor she is afraid to be lowered over the cliff by a rope. She says, "I could not; it is too giddy, to swing down there ..... I have seen that terrible craig." One can hardly believe that a grand passion could be thwarted because of a fear of giddiness in descending a cliff. Then it is only a week later that she defies Marc and all his followers and escapes with Tristan in spite of all dangers. As soon as Marc pays them his secret visit in the forest she immediately renounces Tristan, saying, "I have been harsh, he has been generous ..... He is greater than we two, Tristan." Tristan argues with her, declaring she wishes to leave, not because of Marc's nobility and greatness, but because she is weary of the simple and denying life they must lead in the forest and wants the finery of the court

again. She answers,

> "This love that I thought was great is blindness
> and greed
> And I am unclean, unclean, till I drive some nail
> Right through this passionate heart."

There is something ignoble about this sentiment that even Tennyson, who scourged Isolt so piteously does not imply, and as has been suggested, it strikes a serious blow at the heart of the story, the great love of Tristan and Isolt.

Isolt returns to Marc and is restored as queen. When Tristan comes to her after wandering half mad through the forest, she has him flogged and then almost immediately goes to him and kills herself over his body. There is none of the grandeur and tragic simplicity that belongs to the Isolt we know from tradition.

The poet has been more kind to Marc, although his character is scarcely more consistent. He is more sinned against than sinning, we feel, and the fact that he is a man not much older than the lovers invites our sympathy more than the senile, greedy Marc of other versions. He rises almost to heroic heights toward the end of the play, withholding his rightful wrath when he has the lovers in his power and magnanimously forgiving his truant wife upon her return and making her ruler in his absence. Then, too, his heroic death, fighting with Arthur against the heathen, makes him a martyr. In spite

of his reputation, Marc becomes under Mr. Masefield's handling an almost Arthurian King, the model of forgiveness and Christian virtues. This necessarily takes away from the main theme, the tremenduous love story, and makes Tristan seem rather pallid in comparison.

The treatment of Arthur is interesting. It is one of the very few in which Arthur appears not as the perfect King and founder of the Round Table, but in his more historical character of general. Those virtues which are later attributed to him are evident here, however, and his sympathy with the lovers may indicate where the author intends us to place ours. The mention of Badon Hill, which is the one event of Arthur's life which seems to have historical accuracy, is an interesting innovation.

In conclusion we would quote a review which appeared in the New York Times Book Review of November 20, 1927. After admitting that it would be sentimental to insist that the old legend not be tampered with and that the several different versions of that old legend would prevent uniformity anyway, the reviewer goes on to say that all the old legends did have something in common, they "all flamed with burning passion, melted with wistful longing, and vain regret, and they all were poetry. Robinson caught and passed on the exaltation and ecstasy of the old story."[1] This is where Masefield has

1 From an unsigned review in the New York Times Book Review, November 20, 1927.

failed. Another critic writes of Masefield's Isolt, "Not all Mr. Masefield's grand manner can make her a noble and tragic figure; she is an insincere little minx, a name, a shadow, a nothing..... He only insults us when he sets Tristan and Isolt capering like so many puppets. They already live for us." [1]

1 From an unsigned review in Nation and Athenaeum, July 30, 1927.

MASEFIELD'S "MIDSUMMER NIGHT"

The other excursion made by Mr. Masefield into Arthurian egend has, we feel, been rather more successful than "Tristan nd Isolt." In the Middle Ages minstrels were applauded when hey could sing an old song and give it a new twist and imilarly modern poets are justified in taking liberties with ld stories. Masefield treats his subject in "Midsummer ight" a good deal after the fashion of these old mistrels, icking up different themes of the old song and intoning them uch in his own manner. However, he observes absolute fidel- ty to whatever source his story derives from, in spirit at east, and he is by no means limited to one source. There re evidences of classical, Celtic and French influences as ell as the usual British sources. Masefield attains this pirit of the old legend by the interesting device of conscious- y selecting wherever possible the Anglo-Saxon derivatives in reference to the Latin. In this way he reproduces antique tmosphere and adds to the verisimilitude of his poems. In his respect his work is more successful than Tennyson's, reat as that is, in that it succeeds in making the medieval pirit actual, vital and experiencable by the reader. This is in arked contrast to the remoteness and Victorianism with which ennyson invests the same stories. It cannot be said that the ascination of the Arthurian legend has been captured in this ny more than it has in any former treatment, for it still

eludes us, yet we admit that Mr. Masefield at least gets away from some of the sentimentalism which shrouded earlier versions and renews the lusty vigour and energy of true medievalism.

The first poem in this collection is Mr. Masefield's own version of the begetting of Arthur, one which is more suited to the modern reader than Malory's account of the lustful Uther, which account is used later under the title of "The Old Tale of the Begetting." Here we find Uther, the young leader, tryibg to unite various jealous kings of Britain in a league, to which he wished to join Merchyon, King of Cornwall, who was "aged, savage, mean and grim," and whose daughter Ygraine, "that moon of women" was destined to be the wife of Breuse, her father's friend and the worst of men. Merchyon, however, dismisses Uther curtly, but not before Ygern[1] has seen him and tried to soften her father's abruptness. In lines of lovely poetry the two young people express their love for each other "through some old passion in the stars above." When they go to her father with their plea,he orders his men to hustle Uther forth toward home. He has not gone far when he is overtaken by a messenger from Ygern saying that she is to be married that night to Breuse. Uther turns back and through a ruse is able to rescue Ygern, whom he marries by taper-light in a hermit's cave that night. The two are discovered at dawn on the next day, sleeping in an orchard, and Breuse and Merchyon stab Uther and take Ygern back to Tintagel, where, mourning,

1. Mr. Masefield does not observe any uniform spelling of this name, using Ygern, Ygerne and Ygraine.

she weaves her sad story into a tapestry.

This modernizing of the old version frees it from the violence and the stigma which attached to Arthur's father heretofore, and, on the whole, is a change for the better. There is little spiritual benefit or even literary advantage to be had in the original story of Uther's lust and Igraine's being taken violently while her husband whom she loved was only a few hours dead at the hand of Uther.[1] Mr. Masefield retains enough of "that rough humour of the kings of old," [2] in the character of Merchyon to carry over the spirit of his story without placing the old blemish upon Arthur's birth. Uther Pendragon is a worthy father to the blameless king, both as political organizer and as warrior.

The next poem is "the Birth of Arthur." This is an original interpretation of the supernatural element connected with Arthur's birth. Here Ygerna takes the young babe out onto the Dragon's chair, a stone overlooking the ocean, and there various supernatural figures appear and prophecy: first are the "long-ago heroes" and Kings and Queens who have wrought in the island to make it more fair, they find in Arthur the ripening of the seed they have sown; next, from out of the waves rises a mailed figure signifying Power who promises his support to the new king; a "wonder" then steals forward, "Green light

1 Morte Darthur, Book I, Chapters I, II, and III.
2 Tennyson's "Gareth and Lynette," Line 369.

as of glow-worms was pale on his face," and pronounces Arthur's doom in him, the creation of Arthur, but he says further, "Yet though I shall break thee, I cannot destroy;" he is followed by another wonder, but this one is most lovely, and she is Arthur's Helper from Heaven -- she seems to be a combination of the Lady of the Lake and the symbol of Beauty -- who promises that at his passing she will bring him to violet meadows where nothing grows old. Ygrain then takes the baby home, while the seabirds fly low, singing of Arthur's predicted career and the Power that shall fill him and the Helper that will guide. There is the same mystery and spiritual quality here that we find in "The Coming of Arthur," but while verisimilitude is maintained, I believe there is little to be gained here by changing so completely the old story. There is no Merlin here, no entrusting of the babe to good Sir Ector, and while the supernatural receives full treatment, it is not truly medieval as the older versions are. Masefield, then, gains little, with the possible exception of poetic effect, by his innovations and omissions here.

Next follows a lovely poem which is based on the story of Lot of Orkney and Arthur's sister, Morgause. Only the framework, however, is derived and this new story fills in a breach in the old version, most fittingly. In the first poem we have mention of Morgause as being cursed by a witch and in "The Taking of Morgause" we infer that the curse proves to be wilfulness and too great love of venture. She is, the poet tells

us, a little vixen, heedless of the warnings of all who see her running down to the shore to watch the pirate ship. She wants to play with fire without being burned. There is an interesting contrast afforded here in the use of nature as a kindly friend to the little girl, -- the birds and little woods creatures calling out to her to come away, -- that will recall former treatments where nature was harsh and indifferent. The handsome young pirate king, Lot, does indeed carry her off to "Orkney kingdom's granite tower," with the idea that later, when she is wiser, she will make a spy. This makes a most interesting preface to that part of the story which is known in the old tradition, the visit of Lot's wife to Carlion and Arthur's love for her, not knowing that she was his sister.[1] This story is retold by Mr. Masefield as "The Begetting of Modred" but there is no substantial difference from Malory's version, except that Masefield does not mention Arthur's dream and the Questing Beast episode which immediately followed Morgause's visit in the Morte Darthur. In both versions the lady, "for all of her serpent," failed in her mission as spy.

The next poem is an interesting treatment of the battle at Badon Hill where Arthur defeats a hord of raiders under the leadership of Loki. This story is reminiscent of Scandinavian

1 Malory, Book I, Chapter XVII.

mythology[1] rather than legend of Briton and has no especial value for our purpose, except as it gives a vivid picture of Arthur, the man of war, and his loyal followers, Lancelot, Hector and Gawaine. Nor has the next poem significance in our investigation of Arthurian legend, for it is more derived from other sources and reminiscent of the poet's Gallipoli and "The Old Front Line" experiences, with its tirades on war, somewhat Dante-esque pictures of Hell, and, at last, recalling Greek mythology in the picture drawn of Gwenivere in a chariot, her red-gold hair streaming -- she is more a Juno than a British chieftain's daughter.

The classical tradition is carried on in the next poem, "Arthur and His Ring." This is one of the most interesting in the collection in that it connects Arthur with the passing of the classical gods.[2] When Arthur married Gwenivere she gave him a ring and he in his ecstacy went to worship at an Altar of Venus. He slips the ring onto the marble finger of the statue so that his love might be sanctified, but Venus takes the ring and Arthur is unable to get it off her finger. That night Venus appears to him and twice offers her love which he refuses, swearing his love to Gwenivere. After a night of uneasy dreams and torment, Arthur rises and sees a stranger, "a dark, fierce man, with bright eyes full of power," landing from a ship. Then he goes into the garden where he finds the

1 For the stories of Loki see "In the Days of Giants," by Abbie Farwell Brown; published by Houghton Mifflin & Company.
2 The tradition is that when Christianity came the old Greek gods were driven out.

gods' shrines all overgrown with fungi and the myrtle all withered. Returning he meets the stranger who tells him that the old gods have failed -- "They are but erring thoughts and empty air" -- and advises him to go at midnight to meet the gods as they are starting on their exile and demand his ring. This Arthur does and Saturn grants his request. Venus returns the ring and promises that when Arthur's earthly life is done she will come for him with her Queens "to bring you into port." This is the curious fusion of the Arthurian with the classical and Christian traditions.

"Midsummer Night," the title poem, relates the old belief that on this one night of the summer at midnight Arthur and his court come alive in a hall hewn out of the rock and there retell their stories. The poet enters this cave on one midsummer night and listens as Arthur, Gwenivere, Lancelot, Gwenivach, Modred all speak. Several interesting new interpretations appear here. Arthur takes upon himself the responsibility for the ruin which fell on them all, since he in his early manhood sowed the seed that destroyed the Kingdom, the sinful begetting of Modred: "That young man's loving let the ruin in." This is the old Greek Nemesis doctrine, retribution is inevitable. Gwenivere in her turn assumes the blame, "Destiny being strong and mortals weak." Then Lancelot declares that he "was primal cause that brought the Kingdom low." Next comes a character who is not known to legend before this time, Gwenivach, jealous younger sister of Gwenivere, who "compasst the kingdom's ruin by my hate." She, it is later brought out, was Modred's love and

instigated and abetted him in his hatred and revenge. Modred, too, claims the guilt. "So with lamenting of the ancient woe they told their playings in the tragic plot." The hour glides away and Arthur speaks:

> "But when the trumpet summons, we will rise,
> We who are fibres of the country's soul,
> We will take horse and come
> To purge the blot and make the broken whole;
> And make the green abundance seem more wise,
> And build the lasting beauty left unbuilt
> Because of all the follies of our guilt."

And above their features, lapsed again into stone, hovers the Helper, shining with hope. This last, of course, is Masefield's version of that popular tradition that lasted well down into the ages that at the hour of their greatest need Arthur would return to his people. This is the poem which explains the poet's attitude toward all the old stories and sets the atmosphere, a sort of land of faery, misty under the magic June moon, in which alone these old characters can live again for us. The connotations of the title are particularly happy.

The humiliation of Lancelot and the Queen at the hands of Modred and his friends is the next story retold. There is no significant change from Malory's version, except that here the Queen meets Lancelot at a trysting place over the East Gate on the wall. Having the Queen slip out this way in disguise to meet her lover is a weakening from the old version where Lancelot visits her in her quarters and is there surprised by Modred and assisted by the Queen and her ladies. Perhaps this is a mere

Victorianism, however, and Gwenivere is no less Gwenivere because she slips out to meet her lover like any maid. The older legend is otherwise adhered to closely, even to Lancelot's words of farewell to the Queen and his commending her to the care of his friends:

> "O Queen," he said, "the times are over
> That you and I have known.
> Beloved Queen, I am your lover,
> Body and bone,
>
> Spirit of all of me, past knowing,
> Most beautiful, though sin.
> Now the old lovely days are going
> And bad begin.
>
> I shall die here, but whatsoever
> May come of me, my friends
> Will stand to succour you forever
> Until life ends.
> ....
> Now would that I had arms upon me
> Until my powers fail,
> What I would do before they won me
> Would make a tale."

Compare with these and notice the direct similarity in Malory's words:

> "Most noble christian queen, I beseech you, as ye have ever been my special good lady, and I at all times your true poor knight unto my power, and as I never failed you in right or wrong, since the first day that Arthur made me knight, that ye will pray for my soul if that I here be slain. For well I am assured that Sir Bors my nephew and all the remnant of my kin, with Sir Lavaine and Sir Urre, that they will not fail to rescue you from the fire, and therefore, mine own lady, recomfort yourself whatsoever come of me, that ye go with Sir Bors my nephew.... that ye shall live like a queen upon my lands." [1]

1 Morte Darthur, Book XX, Chapter III.

Malory's account of Lancelot's hewing his way to freedom is also closely followed, although the horror and clamor of that scene is emphasized here by having the fighting take place on the wall and the vanquished fall to the stones below.

The story is continued in the next poem, "The Breaking of the Links," but here there is considerable departure from the older version. When Arthur is told of the discovery and consequent bloodshed, instead of condemning his false queen to the flames he secretly sends her away from the rabble who are crying for vengeance outside and, also, he sends Sir Bors to lead Lancelot away from the mob to safety. Then he tries to silence the mob. Modred tells his story and Gawaine argues with the king against the traitor. Arthur is firm in his support, saying that he sent Modred against a breaker of the laws. Gawaine, Bors and Hector and their friends then leave Arthur to go to the support of Lancelot. While the crowd is still crying for revenge a messenger comes from the Kentish prince, King Iddoc, with word of new and numberless savage invaders. Arthur with his depleted force immediately prepares for war and he is aided by Modred. Whether the omission of that great scene which Malory tells so well, the rescue of the queen from the fire and the slaughter that that rescue involved,[1] lessens the power of the story or not, Mr. Masefield has at least rendered an interesting and vivid substitute

1 Morte Darthur, Book XX, Chapter VIII.

for it. He has also brought out what all poets and chroniclers seem to have been blind to, the feeling which Arthur necessarily experimnced for Modred, who was his son, begotten in his youth, and for whom he musthave had some tenderness in spite of that son's treachery and ignobility. It would deny the laws of nature to suppose that he like all the world despised Modred. No doubt Arthur was touched by this first apparent display of filial affection and responded willingly to what seemed to him Modred's loyalty to him. At any rate we see Arthur championing his hated son and the poem ends with these suggestive and rather pathetic lines:

> "And though he missed two comrades from of old,
> His son was by him and his heart was bold
> To break the raid by this new comradeship."

The introduction of a new character, the younger sister of Gwenivere, has already been mentioned. In "Gwenivach Tells" the intervening events are disclosed: how Arthur was at first beaten back by the forces in Kent and at the instigation of his lady Modred siezed the crown. Then, word coming that the King was victorious, the fickle populace again took sides with him and Modred and his forces withdrew to Cornwall, there to await Arthur's coming. Here, again, Mr. Masefield has neglected what has appeared to other Arthurian writers to be some of the richest material in the old legend. It is in keeping with the treatment of Modred and of Gwenivere, however, to omit that

part of the legend which tells of the nephew-traitor's attempted adultery with the Queen,[1] and inconsistent with the creation of Gwenivach as Modred's Queen. She is an interesting if unessential addition to the story.

"Arthur in the Ruins" carries out what has already been suggested in "Arthur and His Ring" and in "The Birth of Arthur," that is, his supernatural guidance and helpers. In this poem we see the King weary and perplexed, unable to decide whether to march on Modred who usurps the throne, or to make sure his recent gains against the invaders. A woman "live with such beauty as the morning owns," which phrase is faintly reminiscent of Tennyson's "bright as the day," appears to him in his distress and counsels him to march on Cornwall and destroy Modred. This, she says, is his destined course and assuring him that glory awaits him in Avalon, she disappears. The sign which she has given as warrant of the truth of her prophecy is fulfilled the next morning and Arthur turns toward Cornwall.

The next is the story of the last battle, "The Fight at Camlan." Arthur's charity toward his betrayer and son is again evidenced in his attempt to arbitrate their dispute. This attempt is spoiled by the despicable act of some of Modred's pirate friends who direct their arrows at Arthur in the midst of the peace parley. The battle is joined and bitterly contested until Modred's forces are becoming worn

1 Morte Darthur, Book XXI, Chapter I.

and their equipment supply running low. Just at this critical time Sir Lancelot with a host of fresh and valiant followers comes to aid the King. Quickly the two forces join, Arthur on the right, Lancelot on the left. This is an impressive scene and one which, though suggested by other authors, has never been carried out -- the two old friends, separated so long, now fighting side by side, "keeping touch elbow to elbow." At last Modred with nine of his knights is pursued by Arthur with six of his.

The next poem tells of the outcome of that bitter encounter, "The Fight on the Beach, or the Passing." In poetic quality these verses lag in comparison with the earlier ones. The battle lacks mystery and awful din and blind horror of Tennyson's picture of the same occasion. The story is confused at times and at no time is there that haunting sense of doom that other poets have conceived as the central aspect of the battle. Toward the end, however, there is a touch of pathos worth comment, where Arthur again ceases to be the punisher of a traitor and becomes the sorrowful father. He is left alone of his band and Modred is his only opponent. Again the sad father asks his son to come to some agreement. "I am your father," Arthur says, "and your friend." Modred stands motionless with hate. At last he speaks and in this speech we have explanation and partial justification for the hatred and villainy that has surrounded his very name since the legend was first known.

"'Bastard,' they called me; but the bastard's nerve
Came nearer Kingdom's conquest than they dreamt.
I fail; my one endeavour is my last.

I spit upon your fatherhood and you.
You be my friend, who made me suffer scorn
From every living soul since I was born?
My friend, you think? You sorry cuckold; no.
But an account is due
And shall be paid, O luster that begat."

However despicable Modred may be and however he may condemn himself by his treacheries, we must admit that the grain of justice in his claims has long been overlooked.

"Gwenivere Tells" is a refutation of the story that Arthur was revived by the mysterious Queens who took him to Avalon, for here Gwenivere declares that he reached Avalon dead and that she, Gwenivere, helped bury him. This inconsistency of Gwenivere's being last heard of on her way to Camelot before the warring began, and now being at Arthur's burial in Avalon is not explained. She goes on to say, indeed, that after his death she took the vows and became Abbess at Amesbury, though "love remained a flame within my soul." Years later a message bearing Lancelot's crest, an olive spray from Gethsemane, came to her with the wish that it might give her peace as it had him.

"The Death of Lancelot" is told by Gwenivere. Bors comes to her after many years, summoning her to her lover's death-bed. She discards her nun's attire and goes with him but it

is too late. Lancelot is dead and his gray hairs shock her who had never thought of him as old. She helps bury him and strews flowers above him, wishing for the day when she shall follow him.

"Dust to Dust" is a version of that interesting legend of Henry Plantagenet and his Fair Rosamond's visit to the tomb of Arthur and his Queen, which was being unearthed by monks. There the two lay, placid and beautiful. In the face of such peace the two lovers knelt and Rosamond let fall a petal from a rose at her belt into the tomb. Immediately, "like ice that unseen April makes to melt," the bodies disappeared as though they had never been. The inclusion of this story with those of Arthur and his red-gold queen is fitting and interesting.

There follow two poems which the author says are told after the older poets, one "The Begetting of Arthur," which follows the story as told by Malory,[1] and "The Taking of Gwenivere," which is told as the French poets have told it and, as the author says, it is the story, not of Lancelot and Gwenivere, but of Tristan and Isolt.

A beautiful story, decidedly medieval in atmosphere and in mingling of the supernatural with the real, appears next under

1 Morte Darthur, Book I, Chapters I, II and III.

the title "South and East," but this has no direct connection with our legend except that the author places it within the rule of Arthur.

The volume ends with a story of Constans, who succeeded Arthur on the throne.

In "Midsummer Night" Mr. Masefield has shown himself a worthy Arthurian poet and while the quality of the verse is uneven he has made several interesting and harmonious additions to the main body of the legend and given unusual and significant interpretations of characters in the legend. For these reasons we consider this second only to "Tristram" in contemporary Arthurian literature.

CHAPTER V

LAURENCE BINYON'S

"ARTHUR"

BINYON'S "ARTHUR"

> The day goes to the night,
> And I to darkness, with my toil undone.
> Yet something, surely, something shall remain.
> A seed is sown in Britain, Guenevere;
> And whether men wait for a hundred years
> Or for a thousand, they shall find it flower
> In youth unborn. The young have gone before me,
> The maid Elaine, Gareth, and Gaheris -- hearts
> Without a price, poured out. But now I know
> The tender and passionate spirit that burned in them
> To dare all and endure all, lives and moves,
> And though the dark comes down upon our waste,
> Lives ever, like the sun above all storms;
> This old world shall behold it shine again
> To prove what splendour men have power to shape
> From mere mortality. [1]

A skillful dramatization of the events which led to the dissolution of the Round Table is found in Laurence Binyon's "Arthur." This play is drawn from Malory for the most part and is written pretty much in the spirit of Arthurian times. The figure of Arthur, however, still eludes us and while the play does make him a little less of the Victorian prig, we are not yet satisfied with him as the "blameless" and the real King Arthur.

The opening scene is laid at Astolat in Sir Bernard's castle. Lavaine, Sir Bernard's younger son, begins to suspect that their unknown visitor is Sir Launcelot for whom the King

1 From a speech of Arthur's toward the end of the play, "Arthur," by Laurence Binyon.

is searching and begs that if it is the peerless knight he be allowed to accompany him back to the c ourt. Sir Torre, the older brother enters, reviling Launcelot for his affair with the Queen and accusing him of playing with the affections of young Elaine, their sister. Launcelot overhears part of Torre's rude speech and answers for himself, asking to speak with Elaine. This her father allows in spite of Torre's objections. When he returns to Sir Bernard he says, "I have hurt her but to heal." Nevertheless, after Launcelot is gone Elaine sinks into illness.

The next scene at London in the King's palace discloses Arthur alarmed over the loss of Launcelot and the scandal which Mordred has started by his visits to the rebel camp. Guenevere enters and in a speech which is better than any in contemporary treatment states her own case.

> "I am but an idle corner of your kingdom;
> You are called to graver matters."

Even this hint is not heeded by Arthur, who is indeed occupied with grave matters, but if he had attended a little more to his Queen perhaps those graver matters would not have arisen. Launcelot returns at this moment and is welcomed by his King, who goes out commending the Queen to Launcelot's care. This is in keeping with the usual tradition, -- Arthur so good that he is blind to the faults and weaknesses in all about him.

Guenevere resents this lack of personal warmth and care and says to Launcelot, much as Tennyson's Guinevere feels,[1]

> "The King!
> He gives me to your hands; defends me so,
> With circumspection, like a palisade
> From far away; not with a strong right arm
> About my body and a sword in hand.
> I am but a custom and an effigy
> Robed for his realm's observances; and he
> Remembers only that I wear a crown.
> He is as far from me as the night stars.
> I cannot touch him, cannot wound him."

Guenevere does indeed have the "wine of earth" in her veins, but now she believes that Launcelot has chosen a younger love and she rushes out in great anger.

The next scene, however, is the sad story of the lily maid, taken more or less directly from Malory[2] or from Tennyson's later version of the same story,[3] with a new emphasis upon the character of Sir Torre, who hated Launcelot for the wrong he had unintentionally done Elaine and even threatens to challenge him. He is a pathetic figure, this blunt, righteous fellow, with his great love for his little sister and his helplessness to save her. The letter Elaine dictates to Torre to be placed with her on her last journey

1 In "Guinevere," lines 640 to 644, this attitude is expressed:
> "I thought I could not breathe in that fine air
> That pure severity of perfect light --
> I yearn'd for warmth and colour which I found
> In Lancelot."

2 Morte Darthur, Book XVIII, Chapters IX, XIII, XIV, XIX and XX.

3 Idylls of the King, "Lancelot and Elaine."

down the river to Camelot is a mere paraphrasing of Tennyson.[1]

The next is an interesting addition in detail to the story. It is a banquet scene where Arthur and Lancelot are absent, being in conference concerning state affairs, and the Queen heads the table. Mordred and Agravaine seek some excuse to disturb the equanimity of the Queen and place her in an unfavorable light, which occasion they find in the red sleeve which Lancelot wore at the last Tournament and which was, of course, the favor of Elaine. With difficulty Guinevere recovers her poise and the knights quarrel with one another until she leaves, summoning Launcelot to her at once. As she is railing at Launcelot the barge bearing the body of Elaine floats by and Guinevere begs pardon of her lover for her outburst.

There follows a scene taken in great detail from Malory, concerning the discovery of Launcelot in the Queen's room and the consequent death of all the discoverers save their leader, Mordred. In this horrible turn Guenevere foresees the ruin of the kingdom:-- "from this hour all's war and ruin. I foresee it, I that made it, It has come, Doom! Doom!"

Arthur has heard of the quarrel at the banquet and fears

1 See the Idylls of the King, "Lancelot and Elaine," lines 1264 to 1274.

his Queen has been insulted. Gawaine tries to keep it from him, but he says,

> "My royal Guenevere! I did not know.
> I have been housed in my own roof of cares.
> I have been strange to her, that needed me."

Mordred comes in then, spattered with blood, and tells of the fight at the Queen's door. Arthur sends Gareth and Gaheris to arrest the Queen and seize Launcelot, after trying to send Gawaine who refused to have any part in what he deemed an injustice and indignity to the Queen. Arthur as King feels he must be just. He is brooding over the revelation which has just come to him as such a shock when another messenger comes in with word of fresh slaughter, Gawaine's younger brothers now being killed, and the Queen carried off by Launcelot. This slight departure from the old story is, we feel, a weakening of dramatic intensity, having the Queen submit docilely to arrest only to be snatched away before any trial or punishment can be started, and the old scene of Guenevere fastened to the stake, the faggots burning around her when Launcelot rescues her, is more powerful than this newer version.

The next scene, the siege of Joyous Gard where Launcelot and the Queen are, while following the traditional story, does

introduce some elements which add to it and are compatible with the spirit of the legend. Such an addition is the attempt of Launcelot to conclude a peace treaty. Arthur is not able to comply with his friend's request for a promise of mercy to the Queen if she returns, so the war goes on until the embassy from Rome brings a papal decree putting an end to it and demanding return of the Queen and guaranteeing mercy to her. In this scene Launcelot shows himself the more noble of the two and the more kingly, therefore. As has been the case in previous versions, Launcelot is a serious rival for the center of interest. He reminds Arthur of their old friendship but Gawaine insults him and, as has been said, the war continues. Another innovation of the author's is the setting -- a severe thunder storm, where even the very elements of nature seem to be in sympathetic conflict. The third, and one which lends greater grandeur to the character of Launcelot and adds to the tragedy, is the brief interview on the field of battle between the King and Launcelot who has come up just in time to prevent his loyal henchman, Bors, from slaying Arthur. He confesses to the King the wrong he has done and begs that Arthur take his life as forfeit. Arthur, too, appears in tragic grandeur when he says, in answer to the plea that he take back his Queen with forgiving and love:

> "Take back my Queen pardoned to my heart, you plead.
> Ah, Launcelot! Were it merely man and woman,
> Love should be wide and infinite as air
> To meet her at the world's end with my arms,
> Even at the farthest erring. There's no help.
> A man may pardon, but the King may not.
> The King is justice, or no more a King."

Guenevere is returned to the King, however, by virtue of the papal decree. She begs to be sent immediately to the cloister at Amesbury and Arthur lets her go.

The last scene is at Amesbury where a nun, Lynned, is comforting Guenevere when the King comes. Lynned persuades the Queen to see him, after telling how she once denied her lover, Gawaine, who now lies dead. The King appears, exalted, strange, almost transfigured. He speaks as only the dying can speak, with a vision and insight into the future. He tells her that his light came when Gawaine, at the last turned back to Launcelot -- he understood then that Launcelot loved him, the King, even more because he did him wrong, just as Gawaine finally realized in his own case. He recognizes, too, that in his own character lay the fate of his Order.

> "I in my far dream of that perfect realm.
> Clouded in cares of policy and state,
> Saw not what burning soul was at my side,
> Wanting the love that sees through human eyes
> And by love understands."

There is none of the harsh avenger that we find in Tennyson's Arthur, who, while professing that he visits his Queen this

last time not to curse her but to forgive, scourges her unmercifully with an aloof superiority.[1] In this scene more than any other in the play Mr. Binyon succeeds in making Arthur approach human perfection without being conscious of his own virtue. There is a great love and understanding that has never before been part of Arthur's character. The lines quoted at the first of this section are his dying retrospect of his own life and his vision of the future importance of his achievement. If Mr. Binyon had emphasized this note, that Arthur did indeed sow seed in Britain which would flower some time in the future and that the young people who were attracted to his high Order did not sacrifice their lives in vain but that their spirit lives forever, "like the sun above all storms," he would have struck a new note in Arthurian treatment, and one which, we feel assured, needs emphasis. It is true that he has more than any of the older writers seen this aspect of optimism and hopefulness in what was apparently an utter failure, but we feel that even more could have been made of it.

1 The Idylls of the King, "Guinevere," lines 419 to 577.

CHAPTER VI

JOHN ERSKINE'S
"GALAHAD"

ERSKINE'S "GALAHAD"

Many liberties have been taken with our body of legends, but it remained for Mr. John Erskine to speculate merrily on their adaptability to our own age and give an extremely modern reading of Malory's story of Galahad. Unfortunately Mr. Erskine adapts the one aspect of our present society and Lancelot, Guinevere, Galahad and the rest talk as if they were the smartest of present-day smart society. Little remains of the old idealism and chastity of Galahad -- he becomes under this handling an appalling prig. Yet this gay speculation and ultra-modern dialogue can afford us another interesting evidence of the adaptability of Arthurian matter to the peculiar attitudes of every age. As Anatole France once suggested, it is only in the past that one's imagination can find scope for its expression -- the present is intractable, the future vague and unseizable.

It is interesting to note before taking up Mr. Erskine's "Galahad" his own purpose in writing it and his judgment of the legendary foundation for the story. In the first pages of his book he says,

> "It is well to mention these legends (some earlier versions of the story) because they are known, and if we did not warn the reader he might be looking for them in this book. But we shall tell the story as it happened in our world, to people like ourselves, or only a little better -- the story, that is, as it was before poets lifted

> it out of its origin and used it for a language for remote and mystical things. In its humble form it had its own meaning. We say nothing here of the Grail, nor of Joseph of Arimathea, nor of the Round Table, nor of Excalibur; we confine our report to the first causes, as it were, of these famous dreams."

The story begins when Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot were young, -- four years after Arthur's wedding, to fix the date. Lancelot, as in Malory's story, makes a visit to King Pelles on a mission for the King and meets Elaine, whome Erskine conceives as a modernist, a feminist, an utterly frank and uninhibited young lady. No contrast could be greater than this Elaine and a Tennysonian maiden with her ethereal, almost mystical charm, or even that "richlier beseen lady" who is Malory's conception of King Pelles' daughter. The modern Elaine is

> "Not so tall as Guinevere, and her hair was not so brown. She had it cut short and she was slender as a boy, but the mischief in her blue eyes seemed to Lancelot anything but boyish."

This Elaine frankly puts her problem up to Lancelot, who refuses her overtures. The modern author takes the bare outline of the Sir Bromel incident[1] and makes out of this unfortunate lover a thoroughly interesting and humorous character, one of the most interesting in the book. After Lancelot's visit to King Pelles Elaine dismisses poor Bromel finally after telling him that she loves Lancelot. He is a perfect foil for the romantic figure of Lancelot, who is

1 Morte Darthur, Book XI, Chapter III.

"tall -- dark -- deep eyes -- a number of scars on his face.... only twenty-five...... and quite a person," as Elaine describes him to the outraged Bromel.

Lancelot and Arthur later are riding together to a tournament when they come up with Iseult and her two lovers, Tristram and Palomides. Arthur, who, as Guinevere says, needs to be amused, rides up to them in curiosity as to the renowned beauty. Tristram resents this apparent discourtesy, not knowing who Arthur is, and Palomides tilts with Arthur to the latter's embarrassment. Arthur pursues the matter even after he has been extricated from the scrape by Lancelot, and leaves Tristram accepting his apology none too graciously. When Gawaine slyly lets Guinevere coax this affair out of him, she is disturbed, not by jealousy either of her husband or her lover, but because Lancelot has allowed himself out of loyalty to the King to become involved in a ridiculous situation. There is an interesting scene after the two have come home from the tournament, when Guinevere explains her disappointment first in Arthur and now in Lancelot. She says,

> "When I found he was satisfied with himself, and couldn't imagine a career, not even when I pointed it out, there was nothing for me to help him in. I turned to you for the chance to live. I thought I could find life through you. -- I could dream, you could act out the vision. -- Together we could -- even in spite of Arthur, we could bestow on him a kingdom and a name."

But Lancelot has not had quite the same view of their affair.

He denies that he is the kind of a man "that makes a difference in the world, who builds something," and says he has loved Guinevere for herself, not to improve her or to criticize her husband. Arthur, pretending to think Lancelot in love with Elaine, sends him on another mission to Pelles, who hears of the coming visit and wisely sends his daughter away to avoid any repetition of her unmaidenly behavior. While Lancelot is there, however, a message comes summoning him to "his lady at Case Castle." When he arrives there he finds Elaine but the device of magic that Malory uses as Elaine's method of achieving his love is scorned by the modern version and it is by open persuasion and the young lady's determination that the knight yields.

The second part of the story is entitled "Elaine and Guinevere." It is a splendid study in two predominant feminine types: Guinevere, the old-fashioned inspirational woman who wants men to do things for her sake, and Elaine, modern, absolutely without control or refinement, but delightfully clever, witty and fascinating. Elaine comes to Camelot to persuade Lancelot to go back with her, or, at least, to help her raise her son, Galahad. The Queen, overhearing part of their conversation, enough at least to infuriate her, dismisses Lancelot cruelly, and he, like Tristram, goes mad and is lost for two years or longer. He then wanders into Elaine's estate

and his son founds a curious friendship with this madman.

While Lancelot is still away Guinevere in a rather pathetic attempt to call back her youth takes two of her ladies and goes maying in the woods. This account is taken rather exactly from Malory[1] except that according to the modern version there were no knights accompanying the Queen and Lancelot was not out of favor when summoned to redress the wrongs done the Queen. There is, however, the same mortal combat, after Lancelot has been summoned out of his voluntary exile for the first time in more than nine years and, as Elaine had said from the beginning, the first time the Queen calls, Lancelot returns to her. So, according to Mr. Erskine, the inspirational woman wins in this first contest between the two types.

The third part of the book is called "Guinevere and Galahad." Two years have elapsed and Guinevere, talking with Lancelot, looks back over them as their best. She has given up the idea of a career for Lancelot and is content, apparently, to enjoy his companionship. Then Galahad comes to court. Immediately he becomes for his Queen simply another young man to inspire, as one of her ladies rather aptly puts it. She is intensely aware of his possibilities and he is a godsend to her, now that Arthur and Lancelot have both failed in the careers she had planned for them. Galahad is to be, as she herself tells his father, her masterpiece. She gives him the vision that is

1 Morte Darthur, Book XIX.

to make his reputation for utter purity and holiness, which as this writer sees it, are apparently little more than stupidity. It is unfortunate that Mr. Erskine in this more than clever piece of writing denies some of his earlier ideas, as, for example, the necessity of making the characters of literature better than ordinary people, since we are unconsciously moulded by what we read. Certainly no one would allow himself to respect purity, chastity and other virtues, if stupidity would be his only reward, nor be influenced by the character of such an insufferable prig as virtue has made of Galahad under Guinevere's tutelage.

The fourth part of the book is "Galahad and the Quest." This is, of course, largely original with Mr. Erskine, although there is foundation in Malory, in that Galahad did go on a similar quest, but in the modern text, the quest is merely incidental, the theme of the book being Galahad's reaction to the realization that those persons whom he had considered perfect and upon whom he had based the very foundations of his character, his father, his mother and, more than either of these, Guinevere herself, had not lived up to those ideals which he had set for himself due to Guinevere's inspiration. The psychological struggle the boy endures and the small chance he had to rebuild his life as Arthur's new helper, the righter of wrong, the hope and joy Arthur found in this possi-

bility of rescuing his Order from the stagnation into which it had sunk, Guinevere's final rising to the nobility which she had been preaching, in her confession to Galahad that she was the woman his father had loved for twenty years -- all of this is significant as a new interpretation with emphasis upon exactly those phases of the old story which have heretofore been neglected, whether wisely or not, at least to the greater dignity of the story. Galahad, after this series of most shocking revelations, that his parents were not married, that they could never marry because his father loved another woman, and that this woman was Guinevere, who was to the young idealist all that was pure and worshipful, goes on his quest, leaving the whole dismal affair.

The last part is a treatment of the Elaine of Astolat story in much the same vein as the rest of the book. Lancelot comes to Astolat when he is a middle aged man and the dark-eyed, dark-haired child, Elaine, puts to him the same proposal that that other Elaine had made so many years before, with the tragic result poignantly described by Malory and Tennyson. This is what puzzles Lancelot and, we may add, the reader also, at the end of his life when he is talking over his problems with a brother monk, that his best conduct, leaving Astolat without farewell to the child Elaine, resulted so tragically and his worst, with that other Elaine, resulted in the noblest life of the whole realm, Galahad. And Galahad would not

have been the character he was without his father's other great sin, the love for his friend's wife, because she, jealous of her supposedly unfaithful lover, undertook to have the best of it by making out of his son her masterpiece.

Unfortunately, Guinevere dominates the story, regardless of the title. As Mr. Elmer Davis puts it,

> "Guinevere runs off with Mr. Erskine's 'Galahad.' As the woman who made the young knight what he was she dominates the story. ...His strength was as the strength of ten because his head was thick. So Mr. Erskine would re-write Tennyson, and proceeds to inquire into the reasons for this remarkable opacity." [1]

This is the most depressing part of the book, that Galahad, who might be so much more justly depicted and so much more worthily, should appear merely as the soul of decorum, not of intelligent perfection of character. He is indeed unblemished, but are we to believe that to attain to virtue one must discard all his reason and become a stupid prig? As has been suggested above, this treatment of one of the most beautiful of all the Arthurian legends is characteristic of a certain trend in contemporary viewpoints and is for that reason significant in this connection. As contributing to the permanent Arthurian literature, it is unimportant, but as a striking comment of present attitudes it is worth notice here.

In neglecting much of the raw material of this story

1 Quoted from The New York Times Book Review, November 14, 1926.

and by adding to it, the author has, of course, fitted it to his own purpose. It does not ring true, however, to those great ideals and emotions which the legends have crystalized for us through successive ages. It cannot be denied, nevertheless, that the book has been without value; if nothing else, it has at least done much to popularize that particular Arthurian matter and we cannot but feel that some of the nobility of purpose which lies therein must impress the reader even in this Lancelot, Guinevere, Arthur and Galahad, who, though they speak like rather remarkable country club habitués, are somehow illumined now and then with that mysticism and idealism which in older treatments is their chief characteristic. Especially is this true of the character of Arthur. While he appears less often than any other important character, we have a very distinct impression of him. He, even more than Binyon's Arthur, understands Guinevere and pities Lancelot. What drives Lancelot to the monastery is the realization that Arthur saw almost from the beginning what was going on between his best Knight and his Queen, and that he condoned it, albeit pitying Lancelot. Arthur is not so high-minded as to be ineffective, as he is in Tennyson's version, but becomes here very wise, and therefore sadly tolerant. With the exception of the King, however, we must admit that the characters of the legend are in some way cheapened under the direct and psychological study Mr. Erskine gives and do not altogether conform to those ideals which they have heretofore striven for and which some contemporary writers retain.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

Under the necessary limitations of such a treatment as this, we cannot exhaust contemporary Arthurian matter, but must content ourselves with those works which seem to us to be most significant and representative. There are besides those stories and poems which retell in a new way the old versions many which are merely suggested by the old legend, or derivatives of it, for example, a short story by William Gerhardi, entitled "Tristan und Isolde," although there is nothing of the old legend brought into the plot except the name and the effect on two young people of Wagner's opera of the same name. A similar case is that of a volume of plays by Floyd Dell, all modern in Theme and treatment, the title of which is "King Arthur's Socks." Only one play in the collection has the remotest connection with King Arthur, and it is merely a transposition of the Arthurian triangle to modern suburbanites with such a twist in it both as to character and as to situation that the resemblance to the original legend is in name only. The main idea of the play seems to be that in a modern setting such an affair as that of Lancelot and Guinevere would be impossible not because of any improvement in moral sensibility, but rather because "we are hopelessly civilized. We had a spark of the old barbaric flame -- but it went out." And so this modern suburban

Guinevere goes back from a brief moment of love-making with "Lance" to mending her husband's socks, from which the farce takes its name.

A modern Arthurian product of some worth is Warwick Deeping's novel, "Uther and Ygraine." It antidates, however, the limit which we have set for contemporary writing, although it has undergone a reprinting within the last two years and has at last come into its own. It is a charming book in that style which has made the author's later works such favorites. The subject matter is one which has deserved more ample treatment from the beginning, these characters being merely suggested by Malory[1] and almost totally disregarded by Tennyson. The story of the parents of Arthur as told here loses that brutality and force which characterized Malory's Uther and becomes the story of a beautiful love. As was the case with Mr. Masefield's account[2] this change in the old legend appeals more to the modern reader and removes much of the stigma which has surrounded Arthur's birth.

We have examined eight characteristic and representative contemporary products of Arthurian legend. What, now, can we conclude as to the general trend of contemporary handling of the legend? This can be suggested first by a glance back

1 Morte Darthur. Book I, Chapters I, II and III.
2 See Page 70.

at the titles we have used, "The Queen of Cornwall," "Merlin,""Lancelot," "Tristram," "Tristan and Isolt," and a few others. It becomes evident at once that all of these are love stories in which the love element is of primary importance with the exception of "Midsummer Night," which like the Idylls of the King, is a collection intending to bring together a number of Arthurian stories. Even with "Merlin" Vivien is of equal if not superior interest in the story with the hero. Then our first conclusion would be that modern writers find in Arthurian lore the greatest interest in the love stories in women characters. I believe there is not one of those works which we have discussed herein in which the hero is as distinct and as significant as the heroine: -- Vivien surpasses Merlin, the Isolts are invariably stronger characters than the Tristrams, and Guinevere robs Arthur, Lancelot and Galahad of the prime role. And in every one the love element replaces the old adventure, war, political, or religious theme. It is significant to make a comparative study of the mention made of women in Malory with that in modern derivatives. Love for Malory's men seems to have been incidental as compared with the main business of fighting and questing. With our contemporaries, however, adventure is almost universally secondary to the love interest. Lancelot goes off to the Tournament because Guinevere sends him[1] or

1 See Idylls of the King, "Lancelot and Elaine."

because she is angry with him[1] and no contemporary author has deemed these wilder days when Arthur and Lancelot were young and engaged in clearing the land of heathen, bandit and wild beasts and before either of them loved Guinevere of sufficient interest to bear treatment. Even Uther is as devoted to winning Igraine as he is to his adventures, although he is the closest approach to the Malory here.[2] The first change, then, which we notice in contemporary handling of Arthurian legend is that love, or the social element, has replaced the war, or adventure element.

The second characteristic of contemporary Arthurian literature is a consequence, almost a corallary of the first: it is the attitude of the psychologist which nearly all contemporary writers adopt in handling this legend. The heroes as well as the heroines become introspective and thoughtful, rather than vigorous, active, fighting people. This is natural in an age of physical comfort and refinement, when the men no longer have to fight with their fists to protect their women nor labor with their bodies to produce a livelihood for their families. Arthurian legend has been rationalized, intellectualized and the native vigour and ruggedness of those early Britons is lost as they become pscho-analysts and students of their own mental reactions. This may not be a bad thing -- at any rate, it is developing an aspect of

1 This is the account given in Galahad. By John Erskine.
2 We refer here to Uther of Warwick Deeping's novel.

the legend which has not before this age received any noticeable attention and it has its value, just as every successive treatment of the same subjects has had, in reflecting the age in which it was produced. Particularly is this introspection evident in Mr. Masefield's "Tristan and Isolt" where there are long passages in which the two lovers reflect over their various mental states and inner experiences. The same thing is shown in a more lively style by Mr. Erskine in "Galahad." The resultant loss of much of the bloody action in Malory and other earlier authors cannot be judged a loss, but whether we are overdoing the reflective and introspective aspects to an extent which is almost neurotic remains yet to be seen.

Another characteristic of these contemporary works is one which marks our age in other fields than Arthurian literature. I refer to the daring, almost flippant approach we take to anything which existed before our day. While this is not present to any great extent in any of the works discussed herein, unless it be "Galahad," it should be mentioned because such an attitude does seem to characterize much of our thinking today. Now, this is a decided improvement over the blind respect, almost worship, of anything of the past which our literary ancestors indulged in and over their Victorian sentimentalism, and yet we hope that our audácity may not cause us to disregard the truth of those ideals

which the old legends embody simply in order that we may make the characters speak as if they were "at this very minute, in the first drawing-room to the left as you go down the hall.[1]

Now, let us review briefly the additions which each of these contemporary treatments has made to the extension and quality of this literary treasure-house. These may well be classified under three headings: 1) new interpretations of character, 2) revisions and changes in plot, and 3) treatments of hitherto obscure episodes of the stories.

In mentioning again the new interpretations of character, we would first notice one or two general tendencies as to characterization of these Arthurians today. Arthur we have found to be conceived as not so perfect, but as having more understanding and a better insight into human nature. The greater interest in the woman characters of the legend has brought about many complex and intricate developments of Guinevere and the two Isolts, particularly. Then it is generally true that in contemporary treatments the villains are not absolutely evil nor the heroes perfectly good; characters are more delicately shaded so that we find ourselves sympathizing with a Mark and being a bit impatient with Guinevere. Those specific characterizations which seem to us

1 From a review in The Times (London) Literary Supplement, December 6, 1926.

to be particularly new or worth mention here are Hardy's Breton Iseult,[1] Robinson's Lancelot,[1A] Tristram,[2] and the White Isolt,[3] Masefield's Marc,[4] and his own creation, Gwenivach,[5] Binyon's Arthur,[6] and Erskine's Galahad,[7] Guinevere,[8] and Elaine,[8] Pelles' daughter.

A summary of revisions in plot from the old stories would include 1) the almost total abandonment of any supernatural element, as is evidenced in Robinson's treatment of the passing of Arthur,[9] and, also, in the omission of the ill effect of the Grail quest in Arthur's Order,[10] 3) the theory of fate, destiny or Doom, which brings the catastrophe,[11] 4) introduction of the low comedy into the Tristan-Isolt story,[12] 5) a new framework for the Uther-Ygraine episode,[13] 6) a poetic handling of the old popular tradition that Arthur will return,[14] 7) Arthur's paternal affection for Modred,[15] 8) the suggestion that Arthur has sown the seed for future generations to reap in a better civilization,[16] 9) Galahad's whole story, especially his rejection of his parents and of Guinevere. While these are the most outstanding changes made in old legends, there are necessarily many lesser diversions which, however, will have no lasting effect upon the legend

1 Page 27
1A Page 44
2 Page 49
3 Page 50-51
4 Page 66
5 Pages 75 and 79
6 Page 92
7 Page 100
8 Page 96
9 Page 40
10 Page 42
11 Page 39
12 Page 64
13 Pages 70 and 103
14 Page 75
15 Page 79
16 Page 92

and serve merely as devices for a particular incident.

Treatments of episodes in the legends hitherto obscure are valuable, of course, for the general enrichment of the old stories. Outstanding among such contributions by contemporary writers are the Brittany scenes which Malory treats only most briefly.[1] Malory, too, has Tristram almost forget La Beale Isoud when he weds Isoud La Blanche Mains. Then Erskine has given us our most complete picture of those events of Lancelot's life connected with Elaine, King Pelles' daughter, and their son, which events are told in a few chapters by Malory[2] and omitted altogether by Tennyson. Another important filling out of the old framework is the story of Arthur's parents which Masefield and Deeping both relate in some detail and which Malory finishes with in three short chapters.[3] These, I believe, are the chief accounts which fill in obscure orsketchy places in the old versions.

Arthurian legend retains its fascination for poets, novelists, playwrights and scholars. It is the perennial among literary products. While its mystery still eludes us in spite of the cold and penetrating analyses some of our moderns have subjected it to and there is much of it the

1 Morte Darthur. Book VIII, Chapters XXXV and XXXVI.
2 Ibid., Book XI, Chapters II and XX.
3 Ibid., Book I, Chapters I, II and III.

modern spirit cannot sympathize with, we find that contemporary literature has been much enriched by these excursions into Arthurian saga. Such modern versions avoid those common faults of contemporary writings, mediocrity of characters, mere contemporaneousness and naturalism. Whether they will stand the test of time and be incorporated into the great Arthurian cycle as significant contributions cannot be decided this soon. Nevertheless, we of today realize more than ever the immortality of those ideals which have made the old story survive in spite of various handlings, not all sympathetic, and have caused the legend itself to transcend all its versions, whether the vigorous, virile scheme of Malory, the intellectualized handling of Spenser, the Victorian sweetness of Tennyson, or the psychological, rationalized treatments of contemporary writers.

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