A STUDY OF THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS AS TREATED

BY TENNYSON, ARNOLD, AND ROBINSON

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PREFACE

In this study of the Arthurian material, I have attempted to learn something of the way in which the legends have developed in English literature. In studying the early history of the legends, I have found that it could be divided into three periods: (1) the period of origins, (2) the period of literary creation, and (3) the period of translation and adaptation. The last period may be said to have never reached a conclusion, for writers of many nations are still finding in the ancient legends material for poem and song.

I have selected for study the Arthurian poems of three authors, Tennyson, Arnold, and Robinson, because the works of these three poets offer such a contrast in spirit and in the method of treatment. Because of the necessity for limiting the mass of material, no attempt has been made to mention all the writers who have used the Arthurian legends.

I have been aided in my study by the wealth of legendary, historical, biographical, and critical material to be found in the library.

My purpose has been to contrast the treatments of the modern poets with those of the earlier writers, and to show how each writer has breathed into the old stories the spirit of his own time.

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CHAPTER I

EARLY HISTORY OF THE LEGENDS IN LITERATURE

Many writers, both ancient and modern, have dealt with the romances of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. In order to have a sympathetic understanding of any writer's treatment of the theme, the student must necessarily investigate the sources from which the author's materials were drawn. The King Arthur legend has a fascinating background of fact and fiction. It leads back into the dim ages of the past where mythical heroes slew opposing monsters of darkness and death.

Vida D. Scudder, in her book, Le Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory, divides the story of Arthurian romance into three periods. The first is that of origins, and it lasts from the fifth century to the twelfth. The second period is that of literary creation. It begins with the pseudo-historical chronicle, Historia Regum Britanniae, by the Welshman Geoffrey of Monmouth, finished before 1139; and it lasts about a century. The third period is the epoch of translation and adaptation, which lasted through the fifteenth century.[1]

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[1] Vida D. Scudder, Le Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory, pp. 3-4.

In order to assemble and classify the mass of historical material, Miss Scudder's outline has been followed.

In studying the origin of the Arthurian legend, we find that Old English literature tells us nothing of Arthur. Many place-names of the islands preserve the memory of the great hero; but there is a strange disproportion between the abundance of Arthurian place-names and the amount of early British literature, whether in English or in the insular Celtic tongues, dealing with the Arthurian legend. Wales, alone, has preserved any record of his name from a date earlier than the twelfth century.

> But even Welsh writers of an indisputably early date tell us very little about him, and tell that little in a tantalisingly casual and perfunctory way. Yet it is in a few obscure Welsh poems, in one very remarkable but difficult Welsh prose tale, and in two meagre Latin chronicles compiled in Wales, that we discover the oldest literary records of both the historical and the legendary Arthur.[2]

The two Latin documents, mentioned above, are the Historia Brittonum, commonly ascribed to Nennius, and the Annales Cambriae, the oldest extant MS., compiled, probably, in the second half of the tenth century. The Historia Brittonum was said to have been put into its present form not later than the first half of the ninth century.[3] About the year 800, a Welshman named Nennius copied and freely

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[2] "The Arthurian Legend," Cambridge History of English Literature, Vol. I, pp. 272-273.

[3] Ibid., p. 273.

edited a collection of brief notes, gathered from various sources, on early British history and geography. Arthur appears in both the quasi-historical and the purely legendary parts of Nennius' compilation. The Annales Cambriae records the battle of Mount Badon and "the battle of Camlan in which Arthur and Medraut fell." Medraut is the Modred, or Mordred, of romance.

Some Arthurian traditions are found embodied in the songs of the oldest Welsh bards. The Four Ancient Books of Wales is a collection of the earliest Welsh poetry, published, with translations and dissertations, by W. F. Skene (Edinburgh, 1868). These collections of poetry contain a good deal that is, in substance, of obviously ancient origin.

The most remarkable fragment of all the early Welsh literature about Arthur that has come down to us is the prose romance of Kulhwch and Olwen.

> The oldest extant text of it is that of the early fourteenth century MS. known as The White Book of Rhyderch, where we find many remarkable archaisms which have been modernised in the version of The Red Book of Hergest; but the original form of the story is assigned, by the most competent authorities, to the tenth century.[4]

This story is included in Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of the Mabinogion, which largely contributed to the fashioning of the most popular presentment of Arthurian romance in modern English poetry. The term "mabinogi" signifies "a tale

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[4] Ibid., pp. 279-280.

of youth," or "a tale for the young." They contain what is probably the oldest body of Welsh tradition in existence and are largely, if not entirely, mythological in character.

The transformation of the Welsh, or British, Arthur into a romantic hero of European fame was the result of the contact of Norman culture with the Celtic races of the west. It was probably from Brittany, rather than from Wales, that the Normans derived their first knowledge of the Arthurian stories. It is probable, the historians[5] say, that the nameless story-tellers of Brittany fastened upon, and expanded, a number of popular traditions which prefigured the Arthur of romance much more clearly than anything told or written in Wales.

It was not, however, to Brittany that the great Latin development of the legend of Arthur, under Norman auspices, belongs, but to a section of Great Britain where the Norman conquerors had succeeded in establishing intimate relations with the Welsh. By the beginning of the twelfth century the Normans had affected a firm settlement in South Wales. It was a writer associated with the South Wales border who is credited with being the literary father of Arthurian romance. This writer was Geoffrey of Monmouth, who compiled the romantic History of the Kings of Britain.

Of Geoffrey's personal history we know little. Whether he was by descent a Breton, or a Welshman, we

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[5] Ibid., p. 284.

> know no more than we do whether the famous 'British book,' which he professes to have used, was derived from Wales or from Brittany. There can be little doubt, however, that the main source of the Arthurian portions of his History was Geoffrey's own imagination. The floating popular traditions about Arthur, and the few documents which he had to his hand, plainly suggested to him the possibilities of developing a new and striking romantic theme.[6]

The important fact is that, while before the appearance of Geoffrey's History, Arthur, as a literary hero, is virtually unknown, he afterwards becomes the center of the greatest of the romantic cycles. It is from Geoffrey's book that we obtain our first "full-length portrait" of Arthur. It is from this book, also, that we find the first suggestion of the love-tragedy which the romancers were so quick to seize upon and to expand.

The full value of the Arthurian stories as poetic and romantic matter and their possibilities of adaptation and expansion as ideal tales of chivalry were first perceived in France, or, at least, by writers who used the French language. Three stages, or forms, in the adaptations to which the legends were subjected by the French romantic writers, can be traced. First comes the metrical chronicle, of which Wace's Brut is the earliest standard example. Next in order come the metrical romances, of which the works of Chrétien de Troyes are the most typical, These are concerned with the careers and achievements of the individual knights of the Arthurian

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6 Ibid., p. 285.

court. In them, Arthur plays a subordinate part. His wars and the complications which led to his tragic end are lost sight of. The third stage is represented by the prose romances, which began to be compiled, probably, during the closing years of the twelfth century. Many of these prose romances, such as those of "Merlin" and "Lancelot," give much greater prominence than the poems do to Arthur's individual deeds and fortunes. The most celebrated name associated with the authorship of these prose works is that of Walter Map. Map calls himself a Welshman and brings Wales, once more, into touch with the Arthurian legend.

Wace's Brut is of great interest to English readers as forming the basis of the solitary contribution of any consequence made by an English writer to the vast mass of Arthurian literature before the fourteenth century. This work is the Brut of the poet Layamon. Layamon borrows most of his material from Wace, but his work is very different from that of the French poet. While he makes several significant additions to the Arthurian part of the story, Layamon wrote his Brut as a frankly patriotic English epic.

> His poem is the first articulate utterance of the native English genius reasserting itself in its own language after the long silence which succeeded the Conquest. Although he borrows most of his matter from Wace, Layamon, in manner and spirit, is much nearer akin to the robust singers of the Old English period than to the courtly French poet. Even the poet's diction is scrupulously pure English. And

> Arthur, who in the hands of the professional romancers, had already become all but an alien to his fatherland, is restored to his rightful places as the champion of Britain and the great Christian King.[7]

When we pass from the metrical chronicles to the pure romances, both verse and prose, we all but part with the traditional British Arthur. Characters who are themselves the heroes of quite independent legends make their entry upon the Arthurian stage. Tristram and Lancelot and Perceval play parts which divert the attention away from Arthur himself. Thus, a complete history of Arthurian romance involves inquiries into the growth of a number of legends which have, for the most part, only the most artificial connection with the original Arthurian tradition.

Of these legends, the most intimately connected with Arthur himself is the story of Merlin. In Welsh tradition, Merlin, or Myrdin, is a wizard bard. His first association with Arthur is due to Geoffrey of Monmouth, who makes him both a magician and a prophet. To Merlin's magic arts the birth of Arthur was largely due. Merlin makes his first appearances in French romantic poetry in a poem of which only a fragment remains, supposed to be by Robert de Barron, and dating from the end of the twelfth century. Upon this poem was based the French prose romance of "Merlin," part of

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[7] Ibid., p. 294.

which is assigned to Robert de Barron, and which exists in two forms, the first known as the "ordinary Merlin," and the other as the "Suite de Merlin." The earliest romance of Merlin in English is the metrical "Arthour and Merlin," translated from a French original at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Another legend which has become connected with the Arthurian legend is that of Sir Gawain. Under the name of Gwalchmei, Gawain figures prominently in the Welsh triads and in the Mabinogion. As Walganius he is one of Arthur's most faithful lieutenants in the wars recounted by Geoffrey.

> In the earlier stages of the legend generally, Gawain appears as the paragon of knightly courtesy--the gentleman, par excellence, of the Arthurian court. In some of the later romances, particularly in the more elaborate versions of the Grail legend,--he is presented as a 'reckless and irreverent knight.'[8]

The most dramatic legend which has grown up in connection with the Arthurian legend concerns the love of Lancelot for Guinevere. The story of Lancelot is said to be of late origin. Whether, as some have surmised, its motive was originally suggested by the Tristram legend or not, it remains as an embodiment of the French ideal of romance. The great prose romance of "Lancelot" is traditionally associated with the name of Walter Map. The "Lancelot" is a vast compilation,

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[8] Ibid., pp. 298-299.

of which there are three divisions--the first usually called the "Lancelot" proper, the second the "Quest of the Holy Grail," and the third the "Morte Arthur."

The name of Map is linked, also, with the prose "Quest of the Holy Grail." This legend is said to be the most intricate branch of the Arthurian romance and the most difficult to account for historically.

> Just as the ideals of courtly chivalry shape and color the story of Lancelot, so do the ascetic proclivities of a monastic cult assert themselves in the gradual unfolding of the legend of the Holy Grail.[9]

The Grail cycle, in its fully developed form, comprised stories of mythical and pagan origin, together with later accretions due to the invention of romancers with an ecclesiastical bias. The mythical character of the earlier "Quest" versions points to their being of more archaic origin than the "Early History" documents, and they are almost certainly to be traced to Celtic sources.[10]

These tales were used in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries for religious purposes; thus the Grail came to be identified with the cup of the Last Supper, which Pilate gave to Joseph of Arimathea, and in which Joseph treasured the blood that flowed from Christ's wounds on the Cross. The cup was said to have been brought by Joseph to

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[9] Ibid., p. 301.

[10] Ibid., p. 302.

Britain, and its story is thus connected with an old legend which attributed to Joseph the conversion of Britain to Christianity.

There remains one other famous legend to be noticed, which has attached itself to the Arthurian group. In origin and character, it is the most distinctively Celtic of all the legends. It is probably the oldest, also, of all the subsidiary Arthurian tales. Tristram appears, under the name of Drystan son of Tallwch, as a purely mythical hero in a very old Welsh triad. Iseult, the primal heroine, is a daughter of Ireland, while the other Iseult, she of the White Hands, is a princess of Brittany.

> Colored by scarcely any trace of Christian sentiment, and only faintly touched, as compared with the story of Lancelot, by the artificial conventions of chivalry, the legend of Tristram bears every mark of a remote pagan, and Celtic, origin. Neither in classical, nor in Teutonic saga is there anything really comparable with the elemental and overmastering passion which makes the story of Tristram and Iseult, in tragic interest and pathos, second to none of the great love-tales of the world.[11]

The Tristram legend was preserved, probably, in many detached lays before it came to be embodied in the Arthurian cycle. The earliest known poetical versions are those of the Anglo-Normans, Beroul (c.1150) and Thomas (c.1170), of which there remain only fragments. These are the foundations, respectively, of the German poems of Eilhart von Oberge and of Gottfried von Strassburg. This story has

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[11] Ibid., pp. 303-304.

passed through the hands of more writers, probably, than any of the other legends. Like all the other legends it has been subjected to the inevitable process of change and chivalric decoration; but it has managed to preserve, better than the others, its bold primitive characteristics.

During the creative epoch of the Arthurian cycle, all the great romantic legends had reached full development. After this period, little or nothing original was added to the stories; but the creative period was followed by a long epoch of translation and adaptation, which lasted through the fifteenth century until the Renaissance and the invention of printing produced a change of taste in literature. Nothing of importance is written in the English language after Layamon till the late thirteenth century. From that time on, during the period of translation and transmission, a number of poems, mostly translations or adaptations from the French, show that the Arthurian tradition still lived.

> No genius of the first order arose, however, to treat the tradition, and it seemed as if Arthur was never to be adequately celebrated in his early home. One noble artist saved the day, and the Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory, published by Caxton in 1485, closes worthily the long progress of Arthur.[12]

Arthurian legend had started from the British Isles in the early dawn of the Middle Ages. It returned to the British Isles when the mediaeval sun was setting. From the heart of England springs Malory's great book.

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[12]Vida D. Scudder, Le Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory, p. 6.

Malory wrote two centuries and a half after the close of the great creative epoch, and the lateness of his date very nearly destroys his value as a source.

"To the scholar," Miss Scudder says, "he must probably remain a mere compiler who added little or nothing.--But to the lover of romance, his book is a glorious consummation of a long development."[13]

For a long time nothing was known of "Sir Thomas Maleore, knight," beyond his own statement. A Thomas Malory of an old Warwickshire family succeeded to his father at Newbold Revell in 1433 or 1434. He was M. P. for Warwickshire in 1445, in the twenty-third year of Henry VI. Apparently he had fought when young in the French wars, under the Earl of Warwick. Later, he must have been involved in the wars of the Roses, for he was excluded from a pardon issued in 1468 by Edward IV. He died in 1471, in the same year with Thomas á Kempis, and was buried in the chapel of St. Francis at Greyfriars.[14]

Le Morte Darthur, though avowedly a compilation from various French sources, stands in a very different light from other works which translators were then offering to English readers. English versifiers still continued to handle and rehandle the theme. The work which Malory undertook was of a different character, being nothing less than the weld-

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[13] Ibid., p. 178.

[14] Ibid., pp. 178-179.

ing into some approach to unity of the whole Arthurian cycle.

> Arthurian romance taken as a whole is like a great tapestry on which countless forgotten hands have worked. The weave is loose, no thread is held all the time, bulk and detail obscure the pattern. No one person ever saw the entire design, yet it has grown under their labors. One of the extraordinary things in literary history is this emerging of a synthetic vision, an image of a civilization on quest, from unrelated and spontaneous activities of many minds through many generations.[15]

But in the last stage of the process, conscious genius became a necessity. The enormous expansion of romance had passed all reason. Concentration now became essential if any main line of trend and structure were to be revealed. Malory's book marks the final phase of selective work on the romances. He had little care for original inventions; to him, as to other mediaeval writers, the oldest tale was the best. He introduces much irrelevant matter; the richness of the narrative obscures the structure; the point of view shifts as regards characters; above all, he shares with the other mediaeval writers that confusing absence of emphasis which makes structural lines hard to find. At the same time careful study of the book reveals, as Miss Scudder says, "an almost Shakespearean genius for welding disparate elements into a whole."[16]

> There are blemishes in the Morte D'Arthur. The story of Tristram should have been told more briefly,

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15 Ibid., pp. 183-184.

16 Ibid., P. 185.

> or have been carried to an end; and there are episodes in which a better version than that used by Malory is now known to exist. But Malory, like every other writer of his day, could only work from the books he was able to procure; and of the insight and sympathy he brought to his task, the judgment with which he selected and omitted, and the skill with which he keeps his work throughout at the highest level of chivalry and romance there cannot be any question.--In general, Malory's style possesses that highest merit of perfect adaptation to its subject.[17]

The fact is significant that Caxton, the first English printer, printed the work of Malory, the last English writer of note to express the mediaeval spirit. It means that we are at the passing of the Middle Ages. With Malory we say good-bye to them; after him we come to a time which seems comparatively modern. With the coming of the Renaissance, changes began to crowd thick and fast upon Europe. Scholars were more interested in the classical literature of Greece and Rome than they were in the old mediaeval tales. Yet the old romances did not lose favor entirely. The Arthurian stories, among others, remained popular still, as various editions of Malory show; but for a century after his Morte Darthur came out, there was no new literary treatment of Arthurian material in England worthy of attention. Finally, as the sixteenth century drew to a close, notable Arthurian works began again. In 1590 the first three books of Spenser's Faerie Queene appeared, and in 1596 came the fourth, fifth, and sixth books. We are told that he had planned other books;

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[17] "Sir Thomas Malory," Cyclopedia of English Literature, Vol. I, p. 93.

but before any more were ready, the Irish Rebellion of 1598 occurred in which Spenser's house was burned, with his youngest child in it. He died in London, poverty-stricken (so the tradition is), in January, 1599.[18]

In the Faerie Queene, Spenser makes the story of King Arthur an allegory. He uses the figure of Arthur to represent the virtue of magnificence, the perfection of all the other virtues and the container of them all, "the image of a brave knight perfected in the twelve private moral virtues," surrounded by knights representing holiness, temperance, and other excellences. Of Spenser's sources for the Arthurian stories, Howard Maynadier says, "No thorough-going investigation of Spenser's relation to Arthurian writers has yet been made. Thomas Warton's Observations on the Faery Queen, first published in 1754, is still the best authority on the subject."[19]

Spenser seeks to give new meaning to the Arthurian stories by turning them into a moral allegory. He was not the first who sought to make his readers see in the stories more than a superficial meaning; and since his work, each writer who has used the material has breathed into it something of the spirit of his own time.

And now we come to the next great English poet after Spenser to be influenced by the stories of Arthur, John

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[18]Howard Maynadier, The Arthur of the English Poets, p. 257.

[19]Ibid., p. 263.

Milton. He seems to have been attracted to the Arthurian theme by the Faerie Queen, a poem which he is said to have greatly admired, as well as by Malory's Morte Darthur and Geoffrey's History. Milton wrote about a half-century later than Spenser. When he was about thirty, we are told, Milton planned to write a poem on King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. He never did accomplish this purpose, although he wrote a prose paraphrase of Geoffrey's chronicle. But though he never treated the old British theme in epic form, he never ceased, so it is said, to feel its poetic charm.[20] He relinquished his purpose of using the Arthurian material only to take up the higher subject of Paradise Lost. Maynadier expresses a sincere regret that Milton did not write an Arthurian epic. He writes:

> Many critics have believed that Milton was wise in not writing an Arthurian epic as well as Paradise Lost. I cannot but regret with Scott, that Milton's genius did not produce such a poem. Whether or not the Milton of later days was too much of a Puritan to give his whole heart to it, the Milton of Comus would have treated the theme grandly.[21]

The poet who first dared to imitate Spenser in remaking the Arthurian material was Dryden. Despite the unromantic temper of his day, Dryden, like Milton, so we are told, planned to write an Arthurian epic. He was led, however, to give his time to plays, not because of his dramatic genius, but because he thought there was more money in plays than in

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[20] Ibid., p. 292.

[21] Ibid., p. 294.

an epic. Still, he seems never to have forgotten the theme which had attracted him; and, at last, he wrote, not an epic, but King Arthur, or the British Worthy, which he designed as "a dramatic opera." This met with some degree of success, helped perhaps by the music. In King Arthur, many of the characters are of Dryden's own creation. Nor are the characters mediaeval, but "only Dryden's contemporaries pretending to be so."[22]

Similar freedom of treatment, combined, as in the Faerie Queen, with extensive allegory, appears in another author of the seventeenth century, Sir Richard Blackmore, a doctor of note, physician to William III and afterwards to Queen Anne. Sir Richard, thinking himself a great scholar and poet as well as a physician, decided to write an Arthurian epic. What both Milton and Dryden had wanted to do but never found time for, Blackmore did. His Prince Arthur, an Heroick Poem in Ten Books, was published in 1695. "Attempting to unite the Aeneid, Arthurian romance, and eighteenth-century prose and reason, it tells how Arthur won for himself the crown of Britain, after the Saxons had overrun the country."[23] Though Blackmore's epic never won the highest contemporary esteem, it met with a fair amount of favor. Prince Arthur got to its third edition in 1696.

Then follows the time of very least interest in Arthur in the whole history of English literature. Other periods

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[22] Ibid., p. 297.

[23] Ibid., p. 299.

have been as barren of production, but none so contemptuous of the Arthurian legends as the first half of the eighteenth century. No age has been so intolerant in thought and expression. It was full of new ideas, but unable to see good in anything else. As the generation passed, however, the time came for Arthurian stories to receive more worthy treatment. Having steadily declined in favor for the last hundred years, they were now to grow in favor until in the nineteenth century they should hold as honorable a place as ever they held in the Middle Ages. This return of the legends to the high position which was their right came about with the growth of the romantic spirit in literature and the other fine arts.

An unmistakable sign of the Arthurian awakening is seen in the poems of Thomas Warton, which were published in 1777. Warton, the author of Observations on the Faerie Queene and the History of English Poetry, was also a facile versifier. In his last years he was poet-laureate. Of three Arthurian poems of his, the principal is an ode entitled The Grave of King Arthur, which recounts a dispute between two bards as to Arthur's death; one maintaining that Arthur was buried at Glastonbury, and the other that after his mortal wound he was carried by an elfin queen to Avalon. Warton's other two Arthurian poems were sonnets, one on the Round Table at Winchester, the other on Stonehenge. In these pieces, the legends for the first time since the Commonwealth inspire

whole poems which treat them with reverence and with fidelity.

But before notable production of Arthurian poetry could begin, it was necessary that various publications should make people more familiar with the old romantic themes. Among them were Ritson's Collection of English Songs in 1783, M. G. Lewis's Tales of Wonder in 1801, Scott's Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border in 1802-03, Rittson's Ancient Engelish Metrical Romancees in 1802, and in 1805 Ellis's Specimens of Early English Metrical Romances. These last two differed from the others in familiarizing the public with the longer Arthurian pieces; previous collections had included little or no Arthurian poetry except ballads.[24]

This brings us to the nineteenth-century treatments of the Arthurian themes. In this period of literature many great writers used the Arthurian material. One of the greatest, perhaps, was Alfred, Lord Tennyson. In the next chapter we shall see how he became interested in the legends and the use he made of them.

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24 Ibid., p. 330.

CHAPTER II

TENNYSON'S PLAN AND TREATMENT

The results of Tennyson's interest in the Arthurian story are to be found at their best in his Idylls of the King. Whether or not we consider the Idylls Tennyson's most important work, they are his life work. We are told that the greater part of his life was occupied with the study of the Arthurian theme. In the life of Tennyson, written by his son, we read that, from his earliest years, the poet had written in prose various histories of King Arthur. His earliest poem on the subject appeared in 1832, when he published "The Lady of Shalott," which is another form of "Lancelot and Elaine" in the Idylls of the King. Hallam Tennyson tells us that his father had traveled in Wales, and meditated a tour of Cornwall.

> He thought, read, talked about King Arthur. He made a poem on Lancelot's quest of the San Graal. . . . What he called 'the greatest of all poetical subjects' perpetually haunted him. But it was not until 1855 that he determined upon the final shape of his poem, and not until 1859 that he published the first installment, "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," "Guinevere." In spite of the public applause he did not rush headlong into the other Idylls of the King, although he had carried a more or less perfect scheme of them in his head for over thirty years.[1]

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[1] Hallam Tennyson, Alfred, Lord Tennyson: A Memoir, II, 125.

For one thing, we are told that he did not consider that the time was ripe for such a work. In addition to this, he did not find himself in the proper mood to write the Idylls; for, his son tells us, Tennyson could never work except at what his heart impelled him to do. "Then, however, he devoted himself with all his energies and with infinite enthusiasm to that work alone."[2]

He also gave other reasons for pausing in the production of the Idylls. One was that he could hardly light upon a finer close than that ghost-like passing away of the King (in "Guinevere"), although the "Morte d'Arthur" was the natural close:

> and more and more
> The moony vapour rolling round the King;
> Who seem'd the phantom of a giant in it,
> Enwound him fold by fold, and made him
> grey
> And greyer, till himself became as mist
> Before her, moving ghostlike to his doom.[3]

The second reason he gave was that he was not sure he could keep up to the same high level throughout the remaining Idylls. The third was that he doubted whether such a subject as the San Graal could be handled without incurring a charge of irreverence. It would be too much like playing with sacred things. Of this, Hallam Tennyson writes:

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[2] Ibid., II, 125.

[3] "Guinevere," The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Cambridge Edition, p. 442. (Hereafter this edition will be referred to as Works.)

> The Holy Grail however later on seemed to come suddenly, as if by a breath of inspiration; and that volume was given to the world in 1869, containing "The Coming of Arthur," "The Holy Grail," "Pelleas and Ettarre," and the "Passing of Arthur."[4]

In 1871, "The Last Tournament" appeared; and in 1885 "Balin and Balan" was added to the Round Table. Subsequently "Geraint and Enid" was split into two parts, the first part being entitled "The Marriage of Geraint," the second retaining the old name of "Geraint and Enid."

Other writers, also, tell us that Tennyson's final conception of the Idylls was a gradual development, as it were, "from the smallest seeds to the full flower of poetry."

> The great English story . . . accompanied Tennyson with its fascinations from his earliest youth. "The Lady of Shalott," published in the 1832 volume, showed the poet's mind gradually stretching towards its subject, on which it closed with a stronger hold ten years later in "Sir Galahad" and "Morte d'Arthur." "The Lady of Shalott," a lyric full of tone and color, as Tennyson's early lyrics were apt to be, gains especial interest from the faint echo of the later epic which it catches and preserves to us, like the first essay of a mind in a dream as yet unrealized.[5]

In the introduction to his book, Tennyson's Idylls of the King, Arthur Beatty tells us of the prominent part which the Arthurian epic played in Tennyson's life. He says that the publishing of the volume of 1842, containing "Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere," "Sir Galahad," and "Morte

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[4] Hallam Tennyson, Tennyson: A Memoir, p. 126.

[5] Arthur Baugh, Alfred Lord Tennyson, p. 156.

d'Arthur," marks the real beginnings of The Idylls of the King. Beatty writes:

> We know that the "Morte d'Arthur" was written in 1835, though not published before 1842, and the last of the "Idylls," "Balin and Balan," did not appear in print until 1885; and we know, further, that a lyric on this subject was written in whole or in part as early as 1830, while the lyric, "Merlin and the Gleam" was his farewell to Arthur as late as 1889. Thus we can see the important part which the Arthur story occupied in the poetic career of the poet, as it engaged a considerable portion of his attention for fifty-nine years.[6]

Even after the publication of the last of the stories, "Balin and Balan," his memoirs tell us that Tennyson did not lose interest in the Idylls. He would not cease tinkering with lines here and there. Only the year before his death, he made his last addition to the poem, one line in the epilogue, to make clearer what he wished to be understood as the meaning of the whole series.

This was a remarkable way of composing a poem, the last part first, and the others in no definite order. When we learn of the order in which the poems were written, we are surprised to find that there is any unity or central theme to bind them together. Taken together, the Idylls tell us a complete story; although, occasionally, one must go back and pick up the threads of the narrative. Though the three chief characters, whose fortunes are the links between the twelve Idylls, are the central figures in only

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[6] Arthur Beatty, Tennyson's Idylls of the King, Introduction, p. xxvi.

four, "The Coming of Arthur," "Lancelot and Elaine," "Guinevere," and the "Passing of Arthur," the other Idylls reflect their changing fortunes. The spirit and the ideals of Arthur pervade the entire series.

Thus, we have seen how this one theme dominated such a large part of Tennyson's life. His biography tells us that, in this long succession of years, the poet studied the old books about Arthur; traveled in Wales, Brittany, and other places associated with the name of the famous King and his knights; and endeavored in every way to make himself familiar with this, the greatest of his themes.

Tennyson's principal source was Malory's Morte Darthur, which had early arrested his attention. A second source was the Mabinogion of Lady Guest, which has already been discussed. On these two works and on his own imagination, Hallam Tennyson says, his father chiefly founded his epic.

To some extent, Tennyson was perhaps indebted to Geoffrey, Nennius, and Gildas. But the material taken from these old sources Tennyson makes entirely his own by his imagination. Some times he adds new incidents to the legends. The stories of the ruby necklace in "The Last Tournament" and the diamond joust in "Elaine" are Tennyson's invention. His invention appears, also, in his rearrangement of Malory's incidents in order to make them show more clearly the steady growth of corruption at Arthur's court.

Just how early Tennyson conceived the plan of a long Arthurian poem, it is difficult to say. "The vision of Arthur as I have drawn him," he wrote, "came upon me when, little more than a boy, I first lighted upon Malory." It seems to have been the only long mediaeval romance which Tennyson ever liked. "I could not read 'Palmerin of England' nor 'Amadis,' nor any other of those Romances through," he said to his son. "The 'Morte d'Arthur' is much the best: there are very fine things in it, but all strung together without Art."[7]

Tennyson says little of the Mabinogion, which Lady Guest translated into English at the very time when he was making his early studies in the Arthurian material; but it is certain that he made important use of the collection. It furnished versions of some of the material in the Idylls of the King different from any that were given by Malory. Hallam Tennyson tells us:

> He has made the old legends his own, restored the idealism, and infused into them a spirit of modern thought and an ethical significance, setting his characters in a rich and varied landscape; as indeed otherwise these archaic stories would not have appealed to the modern world at large.[8]

Sometimes it was the mere romantic atmosphere of the story that chiefly impressed him, the weirdness and super-

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[7] Hallam Tennyson, Tennyson: A Memoir, I, 122.

[8] Ibid., II, 122.

natural effect of the old Celtic tales. Then, as he brooded over the material, its symbolic and ethical significance more and more interested him so that--as some at least would say--the poetic story suffered as a result.[9]

Some of his critics say that the Victorian poet was wholly out of sympathy with the spirit of the Arthurian legends, in which elements of a Celtic, primitive world are blended with mediaeval chivalry and sacramental symbolism.[10] Neither the aimless fighting in which they abound, nor the cult of love as a passion so inspiring and enobling that it glorified even sin, nor the quest of a spotless purity in the mystical adoration of God and in ascetic service to Him, appealed deeply to Tennyson. His ideas on these questions were very different from the mediaeval ideals. Tennyson wished to give the fighting a high purpose, to combine love with purity in marriage, and to find the mystical revelation of God in service to others. The poet makes his King Arthur give to his knights an exalted idea of war as the means of righting the wrongs of the world. The knights sing before the King:

> The King will follow Christ, and
> we the King,
> In whom high God hath breathed a
> secret thing.

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[9] Ibid., p. 128.

[10] "The Arthurian Legend," Cambridge History of English Literature, XIII, 40.

Fall battle-axe, and clash brand!
Let the King reign![11]

Arthur gives us Tennyson's ideal of marriage when he says:

I wedded thee,
Believing, "Lo, mine help mate, one to feel
My purpose and rejoicing in my joy!"[12]

Arthur gives us, also, the poet's ideal of service to God when the King tells Guinevere of his high orders for his knights:

To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,
To honor his own word as if his God's,
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity.[13]

From the very beginning of his plan to write a poem about Arthur, Beatty tells us, it was Tennyson's intention to make the King something more than a mere mystic or historic character. In the early days (about 1830), we are told the poem was intended to be a sort of allegory of the church. Later, however, he so designed the poem that King Arthur was made to stand in a symbolic way for the soul, and his knights for the human passions which the soul was to

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[11] "The Coming of Arthur," Works, p. 311.

[12] "Guinevere," Works, p. 440.

[13] Ibid.

order and subdue. This later plan was never changed. The king represents no mere individual hero, but our highest nature. His story and adventures represent the perpetual warfare between the spirit and the flesh.[14]

Tennyson makes the Idylls a long study of failure--failure on the part of the purest of heroes and the destruction of all that he had designed. The sin of Lancelot and Guinevere and the false spirituality of the knights who so far forgot practical goodness as to follow vainly the Holy Grail alike brought about the dissolution of the Round Table.

The Idylls are written with the evident intention of inculcating great moral and social truths, of which, the poet believed, his age needed to be strongly reminded. The poet himself said of them:

> The whole is the dream of a man coming into practical life and ruined by one sin. Birth is a mystery and death is a mystery, and in the midst lies the tableland of life and its struggles and performances. It is not the history of one man or of generations.[15]

Thus we see that Arthur's birth and also his death are shrouded in mystery. Some people said that he was the son of Uther Pendragon; others that he was brought by the waves of the sea and deposited at Merlin's feet:

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[14] Arthur Beatty, Tennyson's Idylls of the King, Introduction, p. xxviii.

[15] Quoted by Charles W. French, Tennyson's Idylls of the King, Introduction, p. xvi.

> And then the two
> Dropt to the cove, and watch'd the great
> sea fall,
> Wave after wave, each mightier than the
> last,
> Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the
> deep
> And full of voices, slowly rose and
> plunged
> Roaring, and all the wave was in a flame:
> And down the wave and in the flame was
> borne
> A naked babe, and rode to Merlin's
> feet,
> Who stoopt and caught the babe, and cried,
> The King!
> Here is an heir for Uther![16]

Tennyson makes as great a mystery of Arthur's death. From the dusky barge, "dark as a funeral scarf from stem to stern," Sir Bedivere hears Arthur's last words:

> I am going a long way
> With these thou seest--if indeed I go--
> For all my mind is clouded with a doubt--
> To the island-valley of Avilion;
> Where falls not hail, or rain, or snow,
> Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
> Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard
> lawns
> And bowery hollows crown'd with summer
> sea,
> Where I shall heal me of my grievous
> wound.[17]

The "tableland of life" is, of course, the world where the struggle between good and evil is carried on. Arthur is the Soul which is always warring with Sense. Arthur, in slaying beasts, driving out the heathen, and suppressing robbers, is not only the just king of the romantic chroniclers, but man's spiritual ideal overcoming base passions.

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[16] "The Coming of Arthur," Works, p. 309.

[17] "The Passing of Arthur," Works, p. 449.

The poet himself said that an allegory should never be pressed too far. In later years, he is quoted as saying, "They have taken my hobby and ridden it too hard, and have explained some things too allegorically, although there is an allegorical or perhaps rather a parabolic drift in the poem."[18]

In his manner of tracing the growth of Arthur's prowess, Tennyson differs often from Sir Thomas Malory. One characteristic change claims our attention. The proof of kingship, the drawing of the sword from the anvil, which is used by the earlier writer in "The Book of Merlin," is discarded by Tennyson. For him there is a greater charm in the Excalibur that rises from the bottom of the lake, across which Arthur rows to take the mystic sword, and read the twin legends, "Take me," and "Cast me away." The element of mystery which clothes the coming and the passing of Arthur makes a special appeal to the imagination of the poet.

In tracing some of the changes which Tennyson makes in the story, Arthur Waugh reminds us that there were two courses open to the poet. One was to lend himself to Archeology, to burden himself with facts, in order to give us a faithful picture of the age he depicted. The other course was to idealize the time and deify the man.

> He gave us a blameless king in an age of chivalry, faulty in act, but pure in aim,--a court

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[18] Hallam Tennyson, Tennyson: A Memoir, II, 126.

> set out of the world, yet vexed with the trouble and sin from which no seclusion could insure it. He chose the poem and let the history go; and it were hard to say that the result has not justified his choice.[19]

The sole justification for rehandling the legends was the possibility of giving them a new poetic beauty and dramatic significance. In the latter, the poet has certainly not wholly failed. It is this dramatic significance rather than the vague allegory, which connects the stories and gives to the series a power over and above the charm of the separate tales. The connecting link between the parts is a gradually induced change of mood. One critic writes:

> Each Idyll has its dominant mood reflected in the story, the characters, and the scenery in which these are set, from the bright youth and glad spring-tide of "Gareth and Lynette" to the disillusionments and flying yellow leaves of "The Last Tournament," the mists and winter cold of the parting of Guinevere and that last dim, weird battle of the west.[20]

The story of Arthur, as Tennyson tells it, moves from the brightness of a spring morning, through the heat of the day, into the pale twilight of failure. The epic opens with the triumphant coming of the King, and his marriage in the May morning, bright with spring. Then the story follows the fortunes and loves of Arthur's knights, the wooing of the haughty Lynette by the patient Gareth, the victory of "Enid the good" over the jealousy of her husband, and the coming

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[19] Arthur Waugh, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, p. 161.

[20] "The Arthurian Legend," Cambridge History of English Literature, XIII, 41.

of Vivien to bring discord into the court with her poisoned whisperings. The suggestion of sin ripens in the story of Elaine; where Lancelot's guilty love for the Queen blinds him to the pure love of the lily maid of Astolat; and the final breaking up of the order is traced from the quest of the Grail and the sin of Lancelot to the last battle in the west, where Arthur falls.

The first three books, "The Coming of Arthur," "Gareth and Lynette," and "Geraint and Enid," are concerned with the rise of the Round Table, the remainder with its decadence. "The Coming of Arthur" stands as a prologue, as "The Passing of Arthur" stands as an epilogue, to the whole epic. The unity of the story rests on its confinement within the limits of the fortunes of Arthur. It starts upon the morning of which he takes up his kingdom, and ends with the night on which he lays it down.

In Tennyson's narrative the failure of Arthur is traced, as has been said, to two very diverse passions which enter the court and destroy its chivalry, a religious passion, which spends itself in the quest of the Grail, and a physical passion, which starts with the love of Lancelot and Guinevere, and ends in the prevalence of that "loathsome opposite" of the purity and innocence which the king had imagined to be the heart and soul of his knighthood. These two passions work together to the same end, and unite in the destruction of Arthur's scheme.

"The quest of the Grail," says Arthur Waugh, "has been so generally regarded as the purest, most single-minded outcome of the age, that Tennyson's use of it is the more singular and the more acute."[21]

Tennyson's attitude toward the quest is said to be characteristic of the man. The spirit of his poetry is that of calm, reasoning progress, an attitude averse to excess of any kind. It is this spirit that prompts him to trace the downfall of Arthur's court from the moment when it seeks excess; and excess is sought at its poles. At the one limit stands the religious ecstasy, at the other the sensual; each an excess, and each equally fatal.[22]

Another sort of symbolism which Tennyson makes use of in the Idylls is a symbolic use of the seasons. The action of the poem seems to follow closely the season of the year, although really it covers a number of years. In "The Coming of Arthur," we have the early springtime. The winter has passed away in the passing of the fierce wars against the pagans. It is the joyous May time when Arthur sends for his bride, and the altar before which their vows are taken is bright and fragrant with May flowers. In "Gareth and Lynette," we find the warmer suns of June, with early summer in full activity. In "Geraint and Enid," the season has advanced.

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[21] Arthur Waugh, op. cit., p. 173.

[22] Ibid., p. 174.

The hay and grain in the fields are ready for the harvester. The sky at times is overcast, and the sultry air, with its threatening storms, weakens the energies and at times gives birth to fearful forebodings.

In "Merlin and Vivien" and "Balin and Balan," comes the full summer-time with its overpowering heat and its unrestrained passions. In "Lancelot and Elaine," the season is passing into late summer. The shadows have begun to lengthen and the death of all things is at hand.

In the "Holy Grail," we reach the early fall, not in the beauty of autumnal colorings, but in the bleakness of the approaching winter. In "Pelleas and Ettarre," the shadows are still deepening and the impending doom is seen and felt in every heart. "The Last Tournament" speaks the last word of bitter condemnation. The skies are thick and murky, the leaves have fallen, all hopes have fled.

"Guinevere" brings the winter time of failure, disappointment, and death. Heavy mists fill the air. The time for repentance is past, and there remains only the fearful looking for the appointed end of all things. In "The Passing of Arthur," the doom has fallen, and the icy hand of winter has fallen upon the land and upon every life. The warmth of the sun has withdrawn itself, and there remains silence, desolation, and death. Thus, the story of human life is told, from the springtime of youth to the snows of age.[23]

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[23]Charles W. French, op. cit., Introduction, pp. xx-xxiii.

We have seen how Tennyson changed the spirit of the ancient legends of Arthur, making him the ruler of a shadowy, mysterious realm, instead of a great warrior king and national hero. In the same manner, he has changed the characters of the legends from the primitive characters of another day to symbolic figures which carry out his allegorical theme. These figures are never individuals, but are symbols embued with the thoughts and ideals of the nineteenth century.

King Arthur is, as we have said, the symbol of the human soul, beset with trials and tribulations, but rising triumphant above them. The character of Arthur, as Tennyson creates him, affects us with a sense of unreality. Faultlessness, or all but faultlessness, is in its very nature wanting in warmth and color. His influence and the influence of his oath are felt throughout the poem; but the real, tangible presence of the king is very little felt. We learn of him through the things that others say of him, rather than through the things he says himself. When he speaks, his words are cold and rhetorical. And to his knights, returned from the quest of the Grail, he speaks at length, telling them that the King's part is not to follow "wandering fires," but to stay at home about his kingdom's business:

> Go, since your vows are sacred, being made:
> Yet--for ye know the cries of all my realm

Pass thro' this hall--how often, O my knights,
Your places being vacant at my side,
This chance of noble deeds will come and go
Unchallenged, while ye follow wandering fires.[24]

Arthur is a shadowy figure even in the old legends, and Tennyson has made him not more but less real, a "conception of man as he might be." Through Tennyson's treatment, Arthur has become a symbol, not a human being. He is the embodiment of complete virtue after the Victorian ideal. Our nearest approach to the real Arthur is in the moment of his greatest trouble, his parting with Guinevere, and his passing from his realm. The cold, white purity of the King illuminates the scene of his last interview with the Queen. "He stands above her like a recording angel forced to bear witness against her to his pain."[25]

Like an icy rain of hail his words sweep down upon her as she lies at his feet:

Better the king's waste hearth and aching heart
Than thou reseated in thy place of light,
The mockery of my people and their bane.[26]

This is Tennyson's Arthur, not quite a king of dreams and shadows, nor altogether a king of wars and conquest. There is something in him of the man, much of the spiritualized being. Waugh says of him:

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[24] "The Holy Grail," Works, p. 405.

[25] Waugh, op. cit., p. 162.

[26] "Guinevere," Works, p. 441.

> He stands as a great, luminous background to the story of his knights; as a wide, bright sky that shows up against the breadth and brilliance of its purity the darker shadows that move before it.[27]

Even more symbolic than the character of Arthur seems that of Galahad. Waugh calls him "Divine, but more than man." Begotten by enchantment, some said; living a life of enchantment towards a mystic end; Galahad was with the Round Table, but not of it. In solitude he moves through the story. It is through the events that surround him that Galahad lives to us. "He is an influence rather than a life, a sentiment rather than a revelation."[28]

If we look for symbolism in the character of Lancelot, we shall perhaps decide that he is the life which is ruined by one sin. Throughout the history he proves himself the greatest in prowess and in courtesy. In all but the one great failure of his life he is the "peerless knight." We see how he struggles against the evil influence of his life.

> His mood was often like a fiend, and rose
> And drove him into wastes and solitudes
> For agony, who was yet a living soul.[29]

Lancelot's love for Guinevere becomes at once the glory and the disgrace of his life. It nerves him to deeds of valor; but it keeps him from a truer and a purer love. It keeps

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[27] Waugh, op. cit., pp. 163-164.

[28] Ibid., p. 166.

[29] "Lancelot and Elaine," Works, p. 384.

him from the Grail; and at last it sets him in battle against the King. He is a man with the noblest aims and aspirations, yet lacking the strength of character to withstand temptation.

Modred in the poem may be thought of as the spirit of evil, or the "beast of passion." He is one of the causes of discord in the court. He is the immediate cause of Guinevere's flight from the court to the holy house of Almesbury:

> For hither had she fled, her cause of flight
> Sir Modred; he that like a subtle beast
> Lay couchant with his eyes upon the throne,
> Ready to spring, waiting a chance; for this
> He chill'd the popular praises of the King
> With silent smiles of slow disparagement.
> She half-foresaw that he, the subtle beast,
> Would track her guilt until he found, and hers
> Would be for evermore a name of scorn.[30]

In his analysis of the allegory, Howard Maynadier[31] makes Guinevere stand for Sense, in the battle between Soul and Sense. She is the cause of Lancelot's treachery and downfall. She moves upon a lower plane than that upon which Arthur lives; therefore she never understands him. She thinks him "high, self-contain'd and passionless." In life, of course, our lower senses and our spiritual ideals are always at war.

The character of Vivien stands for falseness and sensuality. She, like Modred, brings discord and trouble

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[30] "Guinevere," Works, p. 434.

[31] Howard Maynadier, The Arthur of the English Poets, p. 425.

into the lives of all those around her. The evil Vivien

> let her tongue
> Rage like a fire among the noblest names,
> Polluting, and imputing her whole self,
> Defaming and defacing, till she left
> Not even Lancelot brave nor Galahad pure.[32]

Critics of Tennyson have seen a symbolic meaning in the other characters of the Idylls. They have said that Gareth represents happy, courageous youth. In the boy masquerading as the Knight of Death, whom Gareth so easily overcomes, they have seen how little Death is to be feared. Balin stands for wild passion; Enid for true patient womanhood; and Elaine for sweet girlish innocence.[33]

The finding of symbolism in all the characters is carrying the allegory too far, riding Tennyson's hobby too hard, as he said.

> The more strongly, though, readers allegorise the characters of the Idylls, the more likely they are to destory the vital interest of the poem. Tennyson himself made a mistake in emphasising the allegory of the later Idylls so much as he did. It is the earlier ones which year after year the critics have pronounced best--the "Morte d'Arthur," made over into "The Passing of Arthur," with its mystery of death, which lends itself to successful allegorical treatment, and the four next earliest, which appeared in 1859, with either no allegory at all, or next to none.[34]

These, then, are Tennyson's Idylls of the King, based upon the tales of another day. They are like and yet unlike

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[32] "Merlin and Vivien," Works, p. 378.

[33] Maynadier, op. cit., pp. 424-425.

[34] Ibid., pp. 426-427.

the old legends; and these likenesses and differences make a fascinating study. We have seen how the germ of an idea was planted in Tennyson's mind when he was only a boy, and how it grew until it influenced and dominated almost the whole of his life. We have seen, too, how he changed the form and style of the old primitive tales into a sort of allegory of human life. And, finally, we have seen how Tennyson changed the old Celtic heroes and heroines into knights and ladies imbued with the feelings, thoughts, and ideals of his own day.

Whether the theme and the characters improved or deteriorated under Tennyson's treatment, each student must decide for himself.

CHAPTER III

TENNYSON AND MALORY: A COMPARISON

In the previous chapter, a study was made of Tennyson's treatment of the general themes of the Arthurian epic. In this chapter, an attempt will be made to analyze the separate idylls in order to show how they differ from the Celtic legends and the romantic stories upon which they are based. As has been mentioned already, Tennyson's principal sources were the Mabinogion of Lady Guest and the Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory. It is interesting to note the change in incidents and characters which Tennyson makes in the Arthurian material.

If the Idylls are studied in the order in which they were written, they give the effect of isolated stories, and we miss their significance as portions of a connected and progressive narrative moving from a definite starting-point to a clear and distinct goal. It is only when they fall into their places in the final scheme that the complete story, as Tennyson tells it, can be appreciated. In order to obtain the connected story, therefore, the Idylls will be studied as they appear in the completed narrative.

Tennyson's story of Arthur, according to Beatty, may be divided into three major parts: first, "The Coming of

Arthur," which was added as a prologue to the other stories; second, "The Round Table," which tells the adventures of Arthur's knights; and third, "The Passing of Arthur," which forms an epilogue to the whole story. Beatty's plan of organization will be followed in order to obtain, as we have said, the connected story.[1]

"The Coming of Arthur"

The story as Tennyson tells it may be summarized as follows:

Arthur, the divinely appointed king of Britain, had fought against the invading Saxons, and united all the petty Celtic princedoms under him. After this, he formed his Order of the Round Table; and all his knights were sworn to vows of purity and truth.

Arthur's fame seems to have spread after his victorious campaign; for he receives a call for help from Leodogran, king of Cameliard, who is beset by his enemies. Arthur responds to the call; but while he is giving aid to Leodogran, he sees the king's daughter, Guinevere, and falls in love with her.

> But Arthur, looking downward as he past
> Felt the light of her eyes into his life
> Smite on the sudden, yet rode on, and pitch'd
> His tents beside the forest.[2]

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[1] Beatty, op. cit., Introduction, p. xvi.

[2] "The Coming of Arthur," Works, p. 305.

After Arthur's return home, he sends his knights, Ulfias and Brastias and Bedivere, to Leodogran to ask for his daughter's hand. Leodogran, however, debates whether or not he should give his daughter to Arthur; because he had heard rumors that Arthur was not the true son of the former king. Leodogran calls the three knights before him again, and questions them in regard to Arthur's parentage. He learns from them two stories concerning Arthur's birth: first, that he was undoubtedly the son of King Uther and Queen Ygerne; and second, that he had been brought to the sage, Merlin, on a flaming wave of the sea. While Leodogran still hesitates to give his consent to the marriage he has a vision of Arthur crowned in heaven.

> And Leodogran awoke, and sent
> Ulfias, and Brastias, and Bedivere,
> Back to the court of Arthur answering
> yea.[3]

Then Arthur sends his warrior Lancelot, whom he loves and honors most, to Cameliard to bring his bride. Then Lancelot

> led her forth, and far ahead
> Of his and her retinue moving, they,
> Rapt in sweet talk or lively, all on love
> And sport and tilts and pleasure,—for
> the time
> Was may-time, and as yet no sin was
> dream'd,—
> Rode under groves that look'd a paradise

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[3] Ibid., p. 310.

Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth
That seem'd the heavens upbreaking thro' the earth.[4]

This is the first hint we receive of the love between Lancelot and Guinevere, which plays such an important part in the poem.

Sir Thomas Malory's version of Arthur's coming differs greatly from Tennyson's story. Malory begins with the story of King Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father.

In this story, Uther is waging war upon the Duke of Tintagil, in Cornwall. He sees the duke's wife, Igraine (Ygerne), and loves her. "But she was a passing good woman, and would not assent unto the king." Then, Arthur with a great host lays siege to the duke's castle. Uther falls ill and sends for the sage, Merlin, who promises him his heart's desire, the beautiful Igraine. Merlin tells Uther that he shall have a child by Igraine, and makes him swear to deliver the child to Merlin when it is born.

Then follows the slaying of the duke, the marriage of Uther and Igraine, and, six months later, the birth of the child. Uther, as he had promised, commands that the child be taken to Merlin, who spirits it away.

Two years later, Uther falls ill of a great malady. "Wherefore all the barons made great sorrow, and asked Merlin what counsel were best." Merlin tells them that God will

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[4]"Guinevere," Works, p. 439.

have his will. He bids them all to come before the King. Then, in the presence of the barons, Merlin asks Uther, "Sir, shall your son Arthur be king after your days, of this realm, with all the appurtenance?" Then Uther Pendragon turned to him and said in hearing of them all, "I give him God's blessing and mine, and bid him pray for my soul, and righteously and worshipfully that he claim the crown upon forfeiture of my blessing."[5]

Then follows the episode of the drawing of the sword, which Tennyson has omitted. After the death of Uther, the country was in great jeopardy; "for every lord that was mighty of men made him strong, and many wend to have been king."[6]

It was not enough for Merlin simply to bring the youth forward as the rightful heir and cause him to be crowned King. This might lead to anarchy and war. A mysterious sword, fast in the body of an anvil, appears one Sunday in the Cathedral church at London, and an inscription, in golden letters, tells that none save the lawful heir to the throne can draw it forth. A tournament is at once proclaimed. The chivalry of England assembles to essay the adventure; and Arthur, till then an unknown youth, becomes the hero of the hour. Every king who is present, every knight who has

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[5] Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte Darthur, p. 28.

[6] Ibid., p. 28.

taken part in the adventure, sees the successful competitor. No one dares deny that the honor is fairly won. In the sight of the assembled chiefs, the solemn service of the Church is performed; the crown is placed upon Arthur's head by the hands of the holy Dubricius, the "Te Deum" is chanted, and the knightly throng disperses.

Tennyson, in telling of Arthur's marriage to Guinevere, pictures the coming of the bride with Lancelot on that beautiful May morning. The marriage follows, with the blessing of the church upon it.

> The sacred altar blossom'd white with May,
> The Sun of May descended on their King,
> They gazed on all earth's beauty in their Queen,
> Roll'd incense, and there passed along the hymns
> A voice as of the waters, while the two
> Sware at the shrine of Christ a deathless love.[7]

In Malory's story, Arthur tells Merlin of his desire to have Guinevere, daughter of King Leodogrance, for his wife. Merlin warns Arthur "that Guinevere was not wholesome for him to take to wife." Arthur, however, is determined to have his own way. He sends Merlin to Leodogrance to ask for the hand of Guinevere. Leodogrance is delighted to grant the request. He delivers his daughter to Merlin, and with her the Round Table and a hundred knights. "And so they rode freshly, with great royalty, what by water and what by land, till that they came nigh unto London."[8]

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[7] "The Coming of Arthur," Works, p. 310.

[8] Malory, op. cit., p. 64.

Arthur is filled with joy at the coming of the fair lady. And the knights with the Round Table please him "more than right great riches."

The Round Table

Now begin the ten stories concerning the Knights of the Round Table; and the first is that of Gareth, the faithful, courteous knight.

"Gareth and Lynette."--In this story, Gareth, the son of Lot and Bellicent, of Orkney, implores his mother to let him become one of King Arthur's knights. He tells her that he will walk through fire to gain her leave to go. So eager is he to win her consent, that he makes a vow to serve in the royal kitchen for a twelvemonth and a day. So he becomes a kitchen knave, but his mother, after a month, releases him from his vow. He is secretly made a knight of Arthur's Round Table, and no one but Arthur and Lancelot knows his name.

Soon after this, Lynette appears at the court, complaining that her sister Lyonors is detained in Castle Perilous by four knights, one of whom wishes to wed her against her will. She asks that Lancelot go with her to conquer the false knights. Gareth, to whom the King has promised the first quest, asks to be sent on this mission. But Lynette scorns him, for she knows that he has been Sir Kay's "kitchen knave." Yet Arthur fulfills his promise and gives the quest to Gareth.

On this quest, Gareth succeeds in overcoming the four discourteous knights, who are called "Morning Star," "Noon-day Sun," "Evening Star," and "Death," who is merely a phantom. Then the Lady Lyonors is freed, and Gareth wins the love of Lynette.

The first part of this idyll is supposed to be original with Tennyson. The latter part follows the account of Malory in the main. In Malory's version of the story, Gareth comes to the court of King Arthur and asks of Arthur the boon of three gifts. Arthur is impressed with the youth and promises to grant his request. The first gift which Gareth asks is that he be allowed to serve in the royal kitchen for twelve months. He promised to ask for the other two gifts at the end of the twelve months. The first request is granted, and the youth is put in the charge of Sir Kay, the steward. Sir Kay asks his name, and Gareth says he cannot reveal it. Then Sir Kay gives him the name of Beaumains, which means "Fair-Hands." And so the youth is put into the kitchen and is treated scornfully by Sir Kay.

Then follows the coming of the damsel Linet (Lynette) asking succour for her sister, who is besieged by false knights. Upon hearing Linet's plea, Beaumains (or Gareth) asks Arthur to grant his other two gifts; for the time of his service is passed. One request is that he be allowed to go upon this quest; the other, that he be made a knight by Sir Lancelot. Again Arthur grants his request, and Beaumains

sets out with Linet. She treats him with scorn, telling him that he smells of the kitchen. Beaumains is patient and brave, as in Tennyson's story. He succeeds in rescuing Linet's sister, Dame Lyonesse, and falls in love with her. This is the principal point of difference in the two versions of the story. In Malory's story, Gareth marries Dame Lyonesse, and his brother, Sir Gaharis, marries Linet.

"Geraint and Enid."—In Tennyson's story, Enid is a meek and patient wife, who is called "Enid the good" by her faithful people. Her husband becomes jealous and suspicious because he hears ugly rumors about the Queen in whose service Enid is. Geraint takes Enid away from the court to his own land. And there Geraint goes neither to tournament nor to hunt, nor does he attend to the needs of his people; but remains always with his wife Enid, so great is his love for her. Still Geraint cannot overcome his suspicious nature, and he tests his wife's love by every means at his command. He makes Enid dress herself in her oldest clothes and go with him upon his knightly adventures. Through all her trials, Enid remains patient and loyal. She succeeds in overcoming her husband's jealousy, and "they live happily ever after."

The Geraint idylls are based on the romances of Geraint, the son of Erbin, in the Mabinogion, and none of the incidents are to be found in Malory. S. Humphreys Gurteen says that the reason for Malory's omission of this tale was that

it did not appear in the French scrolls from which Malory compiled his Morte Darthur.[9]

"Balin and Balan."—This is the story of two brothers, Balin and Balan, whom Arthur makes knights of the Round Table. Arthur sends Balan forth to avenge the death of one of his knights, but he keeps Balin at court.

One day Balin discovers the love between the Queen and Lancelot. Angered at the thought of the Queen's disloyalty, he rides forth along the same track that his brother had followed. On his shield he bears the crown of Queen Guinevere as his coat of arms. The people he meets taunt him with bearing arms which have the false Queen's crown upon them.

Then in his anger, Balin flings the crown to the ground and tramples upon it. Balan, returning from his quest, sees the Queen's crown being used shamefully. He strikes his brother, not knowing who he is. Then they fight to the death before they know that each is fighting his own brother. And so these two knights die because of the wickedness of Queen Guinevere.

This story, also, does not appear in Malory's book. Tennyson puts this story in to show the progress of evil in the court. The moral deterioration of the Round Table has been very rapid since the time of Geraint. Scandal is no

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[9] S. Humphreys Gurteen, The Arthurian Epic, pp. 347-361.

longer whispered, but it is the current gossip of every one.

"Merlin and Vivien."—In Tennyson's story, Vivien, a wicked woman from the court of King Mark of Cornwall, goes to the court of Arthur and attempts to lead the king astray. This she does from a desire for revenge upon Arthur. When she speaks of her birth to the brutal Mark, she says:

> My father died in battle against the king,
> My mother on his corpse in open field;
> She bore me there, for born from death was I
> Among the dead and sown upon the wind—
> And then on thee![10]

Vivien does not accomplish her desire, but she spreads evil rumors about the court, and she succeeds in fascinating the great sage Merlin. She leads him to the woods of Broceliande in Brittany and there prevails upon him to give her the secret of his most powerful charm. When he yields it to her, she uses its power to bind him fast in the hollow oak, where he lies as dead. "Fool," she cries exultantly, and leaps adown the forest as it echoes "fool."

In Malory's work, Merlin appears on the scene long before King Arthur. In fact he is the friend and counsellor of Arthur's father. It is to the necromantic skill and wise counsels of Merlin that the King owes his birth, his order of Round Table knights, and his victories. It is Merlin who, as court prophet and counsellor, predicts the grandest events

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[10] "Merlin and Vivien," Works, p. 367.

in the life of his sovereign, and without whose advice no affair of moment is undertaken.

In Malory's story, it is Merlin who, impelled by his love, follows Vivien wherever she goes; but in Tennyson's poem it is Vivien who, unwomanlike, follows Merlin.

The crowning point of dissimilarity between the two versions lies in the difference of motive which causes Vivien to desire the knowledge of the charm, and in the difference of incentive which induces Merlin finally to disclose the secret.

In the romance, Vivien longs to gain possession of the charm from a wish to have Merlin always near her. In the idyll, Tennyson depicts Vivien as intent on her own aggrandisement at the expense of Merlin's fame.

In the romance, Merlin yields the charm because of his love for Vivien; in the idyll, he is simply "overtalk'd and overworn."

"Lancelot and Elaine."—This is the story of the "lily maid of Astolat," who falls in love with Lancelot, the peerless knight. But he cannot return her love, for he is bound by his passion for Queen Guinevere. He wears Elaine's favor, a sleeve of pearls, however, in one of the King's tournaments. Seeing Lancelot wearing another woman's gift, the Queen is tormented with jealousy. She quarrels with Lancelot and sends him from her side.

Elaine shyly offers her love to Lancelot; but when she learns that hers is a hopeless love, she pines away and dies.

> Then rose the dumb old servitor, and the dead,
> Oar'd by the dumb, went upward with the
> flood—
> In her right hand the lily, in her left
> The letter—all her bright hair streaming
> down—
> And all the coverlid was cloth of gold
> Drawn to her waist, and she herself in white
> All but her face, and that clear-featured
> face
> Was lovely, for she did not seem as dead,
> But fast asleep, and lay as tho' she smiled.[11]

In this idyll, Tennyson has followed closely the incidents in Malory's story. He seems to have caught the spirit of the old mediaeval romance. To carry out his allegorical theme, however, Tennyson brings out that Elaine dies because of sin, the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere.

"The Holy Grail."—The sin of Lancelot and the Queen begins to bring greater and greater harm to the Knights of the Round Table. They turn from practical goodness to superstition. And so when the sister of Sir Percivale proclaims that she has seen the Holy Grail, the sacred cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper, the knights begin to fast and watch for the vision. Once as they sat in the great hall, the Grail appeared, but covered; and no one saw it but Galahad.

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[11] "Lancelot and Elaine," Works, p. 397.

Then the knights all vowed to follow it; and in spite of Arthur's warnings, they set forth on the quest. But only two went not in vain, Sir Galahad, who found it and was seen on earth no more, and Sir Percivale, who saw it but did not attain it. All the others followed only "wandering fires," and but few of them ever came back to Arthur's hall.

In Malory's story, one point may be noticed which Tennyson has not mentioned. That is the finding of the sword which is stuck fast in a stone. In the pommel of the sword were precious stones wrought with letters of gold. "Then the barons read the letters, which said in this wise: Never shall man take me hence but only he by whose side I ought to hang, and he shall be the best knight of the world."[12] Many of the knights essay to draw out the sword, but only Galahad is successful.

"Pelleas and Ettarre."—After the disastrous quest of the Holy Grail, in which so many knights were lost, King Arthur makes new knights. One of these is Pelleas of the Isles. Pelleas has seen the fair Ettarre and loves her, but she despises and mocks him. He obeys her every caprice, even allowing himself to be bound and sent away from her.

As he comes forth with his hands bound, he meets Sir Gawain, who is angered at seeing a noble knight so shamefully used. Pelleas tells him of Ettarre, and Gawain asks leave to

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[12] Malory, op. cit., pp. 349-350.

go to Etarre and win her for Pelleas. But Gawain is false to Pelleas, and wins the love of Ettarre for himself. As soon as he discovers this, Pelleas rides madly back to Camelot. When Lancelot and the Queen hear his story, they foresee all that their own sin will bring upon the Knights of the Round Table.

The story of "Pelleas and Ettarre" does not form an organic part of the epic cycle, and does not appear in Malory's book.

"The Last Tournament."--The poem here discussed is called, also, the "Tournament of Dead Innocence," because the tournament is held in memory of the babe which was found by Arthur and Lancelot. It is won by Tristram, a false knight who loves Isolt, the wife of King Mark of Cornwall. When he has won the victory, he rides to Isolt to give her the prize. As they speak together, her husband, Mark, steals upon them and cleaves Tristram through the brain.

Sir Tristram does not appear elsewhere in the Idylls and has no vital connection with this one, unless it is to bring out more clearly the terrible effects of sin.

Malory has given us many adventures of Sir Tristram. In Malory's story, the infatuation of Tristram and Isolt of Ireland is caused by their drinking a love potion prepared by Isolt's mother. Tennyson does not mention a love potion.

"Guinevere."--Guinevere flies from the court because she fears the treachery of Sir Modred. She goes to Almesbury,

and thither the King follows her, not to blame her but to forgive. Overcome by shame and sorrow, she is unable to speak or even to look at the King as he bids her farewell. She becomes a nun and lives at Almesbury until her death. Lancelot goes to his own land of Brittany, where he repents and becomes a holy man.

In this idyll Tennyson has not kept strictly to the old romance. He makes no mention of Arthur's order to have the Queen burned; nor of her rescue by Lancelot, who takes her away to his castle, Joyous Gard. Neither does he tell of the return of the Queen to Arthur, when peace is made between the King and Lancelot.

"The Passing of Arthur"

Meanwhile Modred has stirred up rebellion against the King and usurped the throne; so that, when Arthur returns, he is forced to fight against his enemies. Then takes place that dim, weird battle of the west; in which Arthur slays the traitor Modred, but is himself grievously wounded. All his knights have fallen except Sir Bedivere, who bears his lord from the field to a chapel nearby.

Sir Bedivere throws Excalibur, Arthur's famous sword, into the lake and afterward bears the dying king down to the shore. Then, there comes a barge, "dark as a funeral scarf," bearing "three queens with crown of gold." They take the King upon the barge and vanish into the light. Of this last idyll Gurteen says:

> Next to the Idyll of "Lancelot and Elaine," that of the "Passing of Arthur" is, without doubt, the finest of the series. In this Idyll, Tennyson has kept closely to his original, both in his choice of incident and in the wording of many passages of the poem. But in addition to this, he seems to have caught, for the time being, the spirit of weirdness which is a marked feature of Keltic literature.[13]

As has been mentioned before, Tennyson takes the mediaeval characters of Malory and infuses them with the ideas and ideals of his own age. In order to advance the social ideas of the Victorian age, then, Tennyson has made his theme an allegory and his characters symbols. The characters, of course, become less natural and less human personalities under such treatment.

In Malory's work, King Arthur is a lusty warrior, who seeks to right the wrongs of his people more by the power of might than by the force of his ideals. He is little troubled by introspection and by conscientious scruples, which makes him a better example of a mediaeval hero than is Tennyson's Arthur. His mediaeval ideals are exemplified in his determination to have the Queen burned; and, also, in his reconciliation with her after her flight with Lancelot.

Both Malory and Tennyson bring out that Arthur's downfall is due to sin; but Tennyson portrays it as due to the failure of an ideal. In order to bring about the downfall of the Round Table and the death of Arthur by treachery,

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[13] Gurteen, op. cit., pp. 313-314.

Malory makes Modred Arthur's son by an incestuous connection with his sister. This moral delinquency, required by the moral instincts of the time as the crux of the story of Arthur to account for his downfall, lowers the character of the monarch from that of Tennyson's ideal man.

In Tennyson's Idylls, the figure that attracts the attention most keenly is the figure of Lancelot. He is the knight that Arthur loves the best. He is the one who is sent to bring Guinevere to the King. The Queen finds in Lancelot the warmth and color which is lacking in Arthur. His fellow knights love, honor, and emulate Lancelot. Elaine finds in him the knight of perfect courtesy. In all but the one failure of his life, he is a perfect knight; and even that failure cannot separate him from our sympathy. He seems the victim of circumstances. He is sent to bring the Queen to Arthur, and he loves her. This one great love of his life is too strong for him. He blames himself for his disloyalty to Arthur, and yet his love holds him enthralled.

Malory makes Lancelot almost as important a character as the King himself. His deeds and chivalrous exploits fill a great part of the story. Tennyson's Lancelot is a man weighed down by remorse of conscience. Malory makes him pine away and die for love.

The Merlin of Malory's story is, as has been said, a more important personage than Tennyson's Merlin. The Merlin

of Malory's romance stands out as magician, prophet, and enchanter. He is a more perfect conception of the weird, Celtic bard than is the Merlin of the Idylls. In the earlier story, Merlin "dotes on" Vivien, and presses his love upon her. In the Idylls, Merlin, though at times attracted and lured by the wily Vivien, is far more often disgusted with her actions. Indeed, at times he seems to hate her.

The Modred of Tennyson's Idylls has been characterized as the spirit of evil. He is sin itself, which must be overcome by the Soul. Tennyson makes Modred the oldest son of King Lot, hence the nephew of Arthur. Malory makes him Arthur's son. In Malory's version, Modred is cowardly and treacherous. Arthur blames him for all his trouble. Just before he is mortally hurt, Arthur says, "Alas that ever I should see this doleful day. For now, said Arthur, I am come to mine end. But would to God that I wist where were that traitor, that hath caused all this mischief."[14]

If Lancelot's failure is the misfortune of circumstance, even more truly is Guinevere's. When Arthur rode by her castel walls, "She saw him not, or mark'd not if she saw." A rumor ran that she mistook Lancelot for the King. She sighed to find her journey with Lancelot done. When she saw the King, she

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[14] Malory, op. cit., p. 478.

Thought him cold,
High, self-contain'd, and passionless,
not like him,
'Not like my Lancelot.'[15]

The life of the Queen is warped from the beginning. She is a woman made for love, with warmth and passion in her veins. She is the "rose of womanhood," while Elaine is the "lily." With Lancelot, she might have been happy; with Arthur she is starved for lack of love. Malory is more impartial to Guinevere than is Tennyson. He does not place the blame for Arthur's downfall upon her, but rather upon Modred.

In Tennyson's story, the character of Vivien introduces the seeds of discord. Vivien's evil heart causes her to suspect where there is the least appearance of immoral intrigue, and her evil tongue quickly spreads the seeds of scandal. Tennyson has completely changed the character of the Vivien of the early writers. The old tales make of her a lovely, ethereal nymph, a portrait of ideal loveliness. There we see no repulsive traits of character. She is essentially pure and lovable. Tennyson calls her "wily Vivien," and a "lovely, baleful star."

In comparing Tennyson's Idylls of the King with Malory's Morte Darthur, we see the changes which the Victorian poet has made both in the incidents and in the characters of the

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[15] "Guinevere," Works, p. 439.

stories. In making his story an allegory, Tennyson has spiritualized his characters, making them the forces of good and evil. The incidents which do not fit the characters as he has drawn them, Tennyson omits from his Idylls. In the next chapter, we shall try to discover something of the ideals of the nineteenth-century poet which caused him to write as he did.

CHAPTER IV

CONTEMPORARY BACKGROUND OF THE IDYLLS OF THE KING

Alfred Tennyson belonged to what is termed the "Victorian Age" in literature. For many years during his lifetime he was the acknowledged dean of the poets of his age, and although the period produced numerous examples of eminence in letters, it has generally been called after its most representative figure the "Age of Tennyson." Since we do consider Tennyson's works as representative of the thoughts and ideals of his age, we should know something of the age which produced the man, something of the ideals and problems of the time.

The term "Victorian" has become, in modern times, almost a term of reproach because of the smugness and self-satisfaction evinced in the literature of that day. This age, as it gave way to the "naughty nineties," won the reputation it has since held among the moderns. To our age of questioning and investigation it seems a "stuffy" age, not daring to face the real facts of life, an age of false modesty and stiff conventionality, unconcious of the strong currents of revolution that flowed by. It was the time of hoop skirts and side whiskers, of hideous upholstered

furniture and worsted mottoes on the wall. It was a time of stern prohibitions and "thou shalt nots" to youth. Of this era, John W. Cunliffe says: "It was at once the strength and the weakness of the early Victorians that they took themselves seriously. Already at the beginning of the period they were impressed by their own achievements and confident for the future."[1]

Cunliffe goes on to say that he is impressed with a sense of the continuity of the Victorian period with the preceding age--the Age of Romantic Revival. The romanticism of the earlier age had degenerated into the sentimentalism of the Victorian Age. "Even the prudery which is so often regarded as peculiarly characteristic of the Victorian Era," he says, "really dates back to an earlier period."[2]

No doubt the estimable Queen Victoria had a great deal to do with the stiff conventions of her day, and it is noteworthy that in The Ladies Pocket Book of Etiquette, published in the year after her accession, the anonymous author warns the Young Girl against "the pollution of the Waltz." But Cunliffe says that all the blame for such sentimental nonsense should not be laid upon the "broad back" of Queen Victoria. He tells us that when Punch was started in 1840, Thackeray's congratulations were upon its "purity."[3]

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[1] John W. Cunliffe, Leaders of the Victorian Revolution, p. 25.

[2] Ibid., p. 24.

[3] Ibid.

And yet, in looking back upon this age, we realize that, in spite of all the aspersions cast upon it, the Victorian Age produced important leaders in both literature and science. In his book, Main Currents of English Literature, Percy Hazen Houston says:

> It was a time of beginnings and transitions, when the critical spirit played upon every phase of life, when uncertainty before swift and revolutionary changes filled men's hearts with dread of an unpredictable future. It was above all the time when the middle class came into its own, the prosperous and Philistine middle class, which had to be educated out of its narrowness and its dogmas into the somewhat more more flexible modern of to-day. From convention and a certain reaction from reality the world by an inevitable and entirely natural evolution has passed into the fearlessness of revolt.[4]

As we have said, Tennyson is the best representative of the Victorian Age. His writings reflect the thoughts and conventions of his day. His biographers say that he was by nature essentially aristocratic, and that he deeply loved the rural England he had learned to know in his early wanderings. He has often sung of the pleasant English country life in his poetic idylls. His patriotic poetry, represented by his "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington," hymns the greatness and strength of England. Like the aristocratic England he best represented, his critics say that he was often insular and one-sided in his political outlook.[5]

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[4] Percy Hazen Houston, Main Currents of English Literature, p. 430.

[5] Ibid., p. 404.

Tennyson was most completely representative of his epoch in his religious doubts and their attempted reconciliation with the new theory of evolution which dominated the whole period. The death of Arthur Hallam in 1833 suddenly forced the poet to wrestle with a deep personal sorrow in its relation to the great problem of divine providence. In Memoriam tells of three years of grief before he could reconcile himself to universal law.

In one other respect Tennyson represents a definite Victorian attitude that has injured his reputation with present-day readers more than anything else: "A certain prettiness of phrase and a sentimentalizing of character and scene runs through his early works, prevails in In Memoriam, and hurts the enjoyment of many of the Idylls of the King."[6]

Many are the epithets which have been hurled at Tennyson. "Victorian," "priggish," "shallow," "insincere," "conventional" are only a few. Yet, in spite of such criticism, many modern readers still enjoy the beauty of his lines. He is the absolute master of his art. His command over haunting poetic rhythms was one of his most marvelous gifts.

After all is said, this Victorian Age, which has been so greatly criticized, takes rank with the great productive ages of English letters, both in accomplishment and in the initiation of new lines of endeavor.

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[6] Ibid., p. 407.

Before entering upon a study of Tennyson's poems to determine his point of view in regard to his writings and also in regard to his social ideals, we need to understand as clearly as possible some of the influences which had bearing upon his work and some of the social problems of his day.

We learn from Tennyson's Memoirs that he grew up in a pleasant, English country home, the fourth among twelve children. His father was rector of the little church of Somersby, and his social powers were famous throughout the countryside. Most of the Tennyson children were said to be more or less true poets.[7]

The boys had one great advantage, the run of their father's library. Their imaginative natures gave them many sources of amusement. One of these lasted a long time: the writing of tales in letter form, to be put under the vegetable dishes at dinner, and read aloud when it was over.[8]

Alfred Tennyson received his formal education at Cambridge. While there he formed the friendship with Arthur Hallam which so greatly influenced his life. Tennyson's poem, "Timbuctoo," obtained the chancellor's medal at the Cambridge commencement in 1829.

When Tennyson went to Cambridge, Coleridge was the genius of the new movement of thought prevailing among the young

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[7]Hallam Tennyson, op. cit., I, 2.

[8]Ibid., p. 5.

men of ability. Tennyson was closely acquainted with all the men of Trinity who shaped the Broad Church movement, and knew Coleridge's works well. Arthur Turnbull says that Tennyson was greatly influenced by the works of Coleridge. Turnbull writes:

> It is evident that Tennyson was being led by Coleridge, as well as by Miss Mitford, to that close observation of nature of which he became the supreme master among English poets; and as he had imitated Coleridge's blank verse in The Lover's Tale, he now set himself to cultivate more sedulously that noble measure.[9]

From such sources as these, we learn something of the early influences which helped to mold the character of the poet. Other influences, of greater social importance to the world of his time, had their bearing upon the life and the works of Tennyson.

What, then, were the social conditions existing in England in the nineteenth century, or during that part of it in which Tennyson lived? In studying the history of this period we find that the industrial revolution is the central fact of the eighteenth century. It is one of those large movements that cannot be said to have begun in a specified year, but which may be placed roughly at the close of the eighteenth century. Important inventions had been made, the full significance of which no one at the time could have appreciated. These inventions were destined to work marvelous changes in the lives of the people.

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[9]Arthur Turnbull, Life and Writings of Alfred Tennyson, p. 51.

When Tennyson began his work in 1830, conditions had already been greatly changed. Steam was then being applied to almost every industry, new machines had been invented, and the means of transportation had vastly improved. The agitation for political changes became pronounced in this period, though much of the desired legislation was not secured until later. The Reform Bill was passed in 1832. Not until that year did the new factory workers receive their rightful share in the government, nor the agricultural population obtain a more adequate representation.

It was not until 1836 that the heavy tax on newspapers was so reduced as to cease to be prohibitive for a large part of the population. About the same time, the duty on paper was diminished. This meant much to the poor people of England and to all lovers of cheap literature.

The agitation for the removal of religious disabilities grew warm in the early years of the century. In 1829, a bill was passed which opened Parliament to Roman Catholics. The restrictions upon Protestant Dissenters had been removed the year before.

The cause of education, also, showed a decided advance. In 1833, the government took charge of the education of the poor. The right of women to higher and professional education was recognized in 1876. Then every recognized medical body was authorized to open its doors to women. Two years later, the University of London was enabled to open all its

degrees to women. In 1880 there began an era of marked improvement in schools, which continued up to and after the death of Tennyson.

During this period, there were indications of new interest in the aesthetic side of life. As early as 1843 a number of schools of design had entered upon successful careers. In six or seven years, the pre-Raphaelite movement had begun. In 1851 the first great exhibition was held.[10]

Such movements and events reveal the spirit of the time in which Tennyson lived. It will be interesting to notice how he was affected by this spirit, and how his writings reflect it.

In studying theories of society in the field of sociology, we find that the fundamental conception in every theory is the idea of man. Man puts himself into his family, his government, and his industry. As the man is himself, so will be his relations with others. Tennyson's writings show that he held a high ideal of this "creature with the upward gaze." King Arthur, as we have said, is Tennyson's conception of the ideal man; and he paints Arthur as more godlike than human. In "The Marriage of Geraint," Tennyson says: "For man is man and master of his fate."[11]

Tennyson teaches that the highest human nature is divine. Guinevere's suffering and sin open her eyes to this truth.

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[10] William Clark Gordon, The Social Ideals of Alfred Tennyson, p. 60.

[11] "The Marriage of Geraint," Works, p. 337.

After it is too late, she realizes the nobility of Arthur's character. Speaking of him she says:

> now I see what thou art.
> Thou are the highest and most human too.[12]

In Balin, "The Savage," Tennyson pictures man uncontrolled by his higher nature. He is indeed a savage; and yet he aspires to higher things, which elevate him above the beast. Balin calls himself brother to the wolves. He says:

> Here I dwell
> Savage among the savage woods, here die—
> Die—let the wolves' black maws ensepulchre
> Their brother beast, whose anger was his lord![13]

Tennyson often has his deepest-dyed villains change their very natures through repentance of their sins. In "Geraint and Enid," Enid's cousin Edyrn, the cause of most of her troubles, undergoes such a change. He says that his former nature "had been the wolf's indeed." And he says that he has learned that gentleness "which, when it weds with manhood, makes a man."[14]

In his Idylls of the King,[15] Tennyson pictures the true Victorian ideal woman. She is a being to be set upon a pedestal and worshiped, to be fought for and looked after. She is not man's equal, but neither does she possess the

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[12] "The Passing of Arthur," Works, p. 442.

[13] "Balin and Balan," Works, p. 364.

[14] "Geraint and Enid," Works, p. 356.

[15] "The Marriage of Geraint," Works, pp. 333-357. Also in "Lancelot and Elaine," pp. 380-400 of the Works.

the baser qualities of man's nature. Such is Tennyson's ideal woman. His evil women are painted very, very black, almost fiendish.

The characters of Enid and Elaine are Tennyson's portrayal of ideal womanhood. Enid is gentle, loving, patient, and domineered over by her lord and master.

She is not at all the twentieth-century ideal of a perfect wife. Modern wives tend to think of her as "a door mat" and to call her a "patient Griselda" type. Elaine, too, although permitted a great freedom by her father, is the Victorian ideal of perfect young womanhood. She idealizes Lancelot as the most noble of heroes, and pines away and dies because she cannot win his love.

> I fain would follow love, if that could be;
> I needs must follow death, who calls for me;
> Call and I follow, I follow! Let me die.[16]

On the other hand, the character of Vivien, as has been noticed, is painted in the most revolting colors. She is pictured as a wanton, glorying in her sin. She says:

> There is no being pure,
> My cherub; saith not Holy Writ the same?[17]

The character of Guinevere, like that of Lancelot, is the more human because she does fall short of perfection. Tennyson's Guinevere is truer to the mediaeval idea of womanhood than are his other women. She is almost always sweet,

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[16] "Lancelot and Elaine," Works, p. 395.

[17] "Merlin and Vivien," Works, p. 367.

gracious, queenly. And yet in "Elaine," comes that undignified storm of jealous passion. The diamonds are flung out of the window, and she hurls charges at Lancelot like any jealous shrew. Tennyson does make excuse for Guinevere's treachery to the King. He gives us a rumor that Guinevere saw and loved Lancelot, believing him to be the King.[18]

Tennyson expresses his belief that marriage is necessary for the completed life of either man or woman. In "The Coming of Arthur" he says:

> for saving I be join'd
> To her that is the fairest under heaven,
> I seem as nothing in the mighty world,
> And cannot will my will, nor work my work
> Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm
> Victor and lord. But were I join'd with her,
> Then we might live together as one life,
> And reigning with one will in everything
> Have power on this dead world to make it live.[19]

This is Tennyson's conception of an ideal marriage. Hallam Tennyson says that his father's marriage was a happy one. He quotes his father's words concerning this: "The peace of God came into my life before the alter when I wedded her."[20]

That Tennyson was a lover of children is also shown in the Idylls. It was a child that called forth the tenderness in Guinevere's nature. This was the babe found by Arthur and Lancelot:

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[18]"Merlin and Vivien," Works, p. 377.

[19]"The Coming of Arthur," Works, p. 305.

[20]Hallam Tennyson, op. cit., I, 329.

A maiden babe, which Arthur pitying took
Then gave it to his Queen to rear. The Queen
But coldly acquiescing, in her white arms
Received, and after loved it tenderly,
And named it Nestling; so forgot herself
A moment, and her cares.[21]

Later it was a child within the nunnery walls who was the companion of the troubled Queen. This child it was, "who pleased her with a babbling heedlessness" and made her for a moment forget her grief.[22]

From such sources, we discover something of the ideals of the man in regard to the most personal factors of his life, his home and family. His personality was undoubtedly greatly influenced by his early home life, his marriage, and those enduring friendships which he formed while in school. His In Memoriam is his tribute to his closest friend, Arthur Hallam. Tennyson's clergyman father surely had a great deal to do with the formation of the young man's early religious beliefs.

From such personal matters, we turn to his ideas about the larger social problems of his time.

Hugh Walker in his book, The Literature of the Victorian Era, tells us that Tennyson's interest in the wider concerns of human society never declined, but rather grew almost to the end. He was very patriotic, and "never lost an opportuni-

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[21] "The Last Tournament," Works, p. 422.

[22] "Guinevere," Works, p. 436.

ty of singing the glories of England, whether for her political stability or for her renown in arms."[23] A few of his patriotic poems are: "Of Old Sat Freedom on the Heights," "Love Thou Thy Land," "With Love Far-Brought," "England and America in 1782," "The Charge of the Light Brigade," and "The Defense of Lucknow." In Tennyson's drama, "Queen Mary," he says:

". . . there's no glory
Like his who saves his country."[24]

Tennyson has often been called a typical English aristocrat because of his conventional attitude of reverence for the crown. His poems, "To the Queen," "On the Jubilee of Queen Victoria," and the "Dedication" to Prince Albert in the Idylls of the King, show this attitude. John W. Cunliffe says that the Idylls were "an attempt to Victorianize Malory and the Mabinogion and to make over King Arthur into the likeness of Prince Albert."[25] In the "Dedication" Tennyson compares Albert to an ideal knight. Of the Prince he writes:

And indeed he seems to me
Scarce other than my king's ideal knight
'Who reverenced his conscience as his king;
Whose glory was redressing human wrong;
Who spake no slander, no, nor listen'd to it;
Who loved one only and who clave to her.'[26]

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[23] "Guinevere," Works, p. 375.

[24] "Queen Mary," Works, p. 572.

[25] Cunliffe, op. cit., p. 37.

[26] "Dedication," Works, p. 303.

In "Guinevere" Tennyson shows us what he believed the policy of an English king should be. When Arthur takes his last farewell of the Queen, he tells her that she has spoiled the purpose of his life, which was the binding together of all his realms under one head. Arthur says:

> But I was first of all the kings who drew
> The knighthood-errant of this realm and all
> The realm together under me, the Head,
> In that fair Order of my Table Round,
> A glorious company, the flower of man,
> To serve as model for the mighty world,
> And be the fair beginning of a time.[27]

Arthur was Tennyson's ideal king, though he failed through the treachery and sin of some whom he had chosen. The true sovereign will be loved by his people; so Arthur was held in honor and affection by all the knights of the Round Table. It is Arthur, the ideal king, who says:

> The King who fights his people, fights himself.
> And they my knights, who loved me once, the stroke
> That strikes them dead is as my death to me.[28]

Tennyson's age was, as we have said, an age of scientific awakening. Science was busy changing people's views of many things which they had formerly held sacred. It was assumed by many hard thinkers that the teachings of science annihilated the belief in the permanency of the soul. Arthur Turnbull says that during the whole of Tennyson's life he was

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[27] "Guinevere," Works, p. 440.

[28] "The Passing of Arthur," Works, p. 444.

concerned with the question of immortality.[29] The poet voices some of his questioning in two of his poems; "Despair" and "Vastness." In the poem "Despair" he says:

> Have I crazed myself over their horrible infidel writings? O, yes,
> For these are the new dark ages, you see, of the popular press
> When the bat comes out of his cave, and the owls are whooping at noon,
> And doubt is the lord of this dunghill and crows to the sun and the moon,
> Till the sun and the moon of our science are both of them turn'd into blood,
> And Hope will have broken her heart, running after a shadow of good;
> For their knowing and know-nothing books are scatter'd from hand to hand.
> We have knelt in your know-all chapel, too, looking over the sand.[30]

Such is the cry of an embittered soul, longing for the calm, unquestioning faith of the past. Tennyson's King Arthur says:

> I found Him in the shining of the stars,
> I mark'd Him in the flowering of His fields,
> But in His ways with men I find Him not.[31]

And yet the same pen wrote the poem, "Crossing the Bar," with its sublime faith:

> I hope to see my Pilot face to face,
> When I have crossed the bar.[32]

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[29] Turnbull, op. cit., p. 187.

[30] "Despair," Works, p. 497.

[31] "The Passing of Arthur," Works, p. 443.

[32] "Crossing the Bar," Works, p. 753.

In the last years of his life, Tennyson must have found the answer to his questionings and returned to his earlier faith.

Hallam Tennyson says that "The Holy Grail," of all the Idylls, most completely expresses his father's highest self. He quotes his father's words:

> "The Holy Grail" is one of the most imaginative of all my poems. I have expressed there my strong feeling as to the Reality of the Unseen. The end, when the king speaks of his work and of his visions, is intended to be the summing up of all in the highest note by the highest of human men.[33]

In this poem Arthur tells his knights that the King

> . . . may not wander from the allotted field
> Before his work be done, but, being done,
> Let visions of the night or of the day
> Come as they will; and many a time they come,
> Until this earth he walks on seems not earth,
> This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,
> The air that smites his forehead is not air
> But vision--yea, his very hand and foot--
> In moments when he feels he cannot die,
> And knows himself no vision to himself,
> Nor the high God a vision, nor that One
> Who rose again.[34]

The questions of the proper position of women in society, the functions they might endeavor to discharge in addition to those of the family which obviously fall to them, and the education which would fit them for those functions were just beginning to be agitated in England. The woman of romance was a queen of love and beauty. The woman of

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[33] Hallam Tennyson, op. cit., II, 89.

[34] "The Holy Grail," Works, p. 413.

reality in the nineteenth century was a being of no political power, and of very little real power of any sort. Her education was very narrow, consisting chiefly of "accomplishments." She could embroider, paint a little, and play commonplace music. She was barred from the professions. If she did anything outside her own home she was criticized as being "unsexed." We are told that the earliest female writers carefully concealed the fact that they were women by using a masculine pseudonym.[35]

The women of Tennyson's earlier poems are all romantic beings who would not stand the wear and tear of real life. We are told, however, that Tennyson was one of the early advocates of higher education for women. In Tennyson: A Memoir, Hallam Tennyson says: "His friends report my father to have said that two great social questions impending in England were 'the housing and education of the poor man before making him our master, and the higher education of women.'"[36]

Some of Tennyson's critics have found fault with him for having resorted to the Arthurian legend for the material on which to found his teachings of life, holding that the world he paints in the Idylls of the King is too unreal for modern acceptance. Hugh Walker says that when Tennyson

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[35] Hugh Walker, The Literature of the Victorian Era, p. 378.

[36] II, 249.

goes back to the Middle Ages, he does so in obedience to a fashion of his time. Walker says: "He made it the great end of his art to express the modern spirit, and the delineation of other times only a means to that end."[37]

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[37] The Literature of the Victorian Era, p. 376.

CHAPTER V

ARNOLD

Another writer of the nineteenth century who treated a portion of the Arthurian material is Matthew Arnold. Tennyson and Arnold belong to the same period of English literature, the Victorian Era; and yet their treatments of the ancient legends are so different as to be worthy of notice. Since both writers belonged to the same age and were affected by the same large social movements, we wonder why their methods and points of view are so different. In order to find an answer to this question, we must, as in the case of Tennyson, learn something of the influences which aided in the development of Matthew Arnold's character. In comparing the Arthurian poems of the two writers, we should like to learn in what respects they are alike, in what respects they are different, and, if we can, why they differ.

We have seen that Tennyson took almost the whole body of Arthurian material upon which to base his Idylls of the King, and that he even added some stories which had little or no connection with the Arthurian cycle of stories. Arnold, on the other hand, has selected only the Tristram stories for his treatment. In Malory's romances of King Arthur, the stories of Tristram play an important part. In

Tennyson's Idylls, Tristram figures in only one episode, "The Last Tournament." We have seen already how Tristram's character deteriorated under Tennyson's treatment. The Tristram legend has become almost as important in song and story in these later years as the story of King Arthur himself. In selecting this tale of Tristram and his two Isolts (Iseults)[1] from the mass of Arthurian material, Arnold shows his dramatic instinct. Arnold's natural tendency, we are told, was towards subjects which possessed an essential greatness or "truth of substance."[2] His "Tristram and Iseult" suggests that here is a lofty subject treated with high seriousness. It was the fashion of the day, as we have said, for writers to select their subjects from the past and to try to bring them into conformity with contemporary feeling. Some writers have tried to teach new lessons by the old stories, as Tennyson did; others have given new sentiments to the old characters. It is through his new conception of the characters that Arnold has given his "Tristram and Iseult" new life. In taking a great heroic theme familiar to his readers, the writer knows that each incident which may be dwelt upon has behind it the whole background of a

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[1] The name of the "Tristram" heroine is spelled in various ways. Tennyson and Robinson spell it "Isolt," while Arnold goes back to the mediaeval spelling of "Iseult."

[2] Stanley F. Williams, Studies in Victorian Literature, p. 134.

well-known tragic story. Speaking of such subjects for potry, Stopford A. Brooke says:

> No wise critic would every say that the poet should not take his subjects of the past, or that the subjects of the past are exhausted. But he would say that the poet who wrote only of the past, ignoring the present, would find that after a time his poetic enthusiasm would lessen and finally die away; or that he would be forced to introduce, probably unconsciously modern feeling or a modern atmosphere into his record of ancient subjects.[3]

Both Tennyson and Arnold have introduced a modern atmosphere into the ancient material.

In the preface to the second edition of his poems, Arnold advised the poet to choose for his subjects great actions, without regarding what time they belong to; for he says, there is "an immortal strength in the stories of great actions."[4] He undoubtedly felt that he had found the necessary great actions in the Arthurian legends. In comparing his Tristram with the hero of Malory's stories, we wonder what changes he might have made in the other romances of Arthur had he chosen to use them.

In order to learn something of Arnold's point of view and the reason for it, let us study some of the influences which surrounded his early life.

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[3] Four Victorian Poets, p. 102.

[4] "Advertisement to the Second Edition," Poems by Matthew Arnold, Introduction by R. A. Scott-Jones, p. 17. All references to the poem "Tristram and Iseult" are from the above volume, and it will be referred to in future notes as Poems.

Matthew Arnold was educated at Winchester and Rugby. He went up to Balliol College, Oxford, in 1841, and won a fellowship at Oriel in 1845. In 1851 he became inspector of schools. Besides his ordinary routine work as inspector, he discharged the important duty of visiting and reporting upon the schools and universities of France and Germany. From 1857 to 1867 he was professor of poetry at Oxford. In his later years he made two visits to America, where also he lectured. He afterwards published the addresses under the title of Discourses in America.[5]

It was as a poet that Arnold began his literary career. He won prizes for poetry at Rugby and at Oxford, and in 1849 he published his first volume, The Strayed Reveller, and Other Poems. Arnold is equally famous as a poet and as a critic. Hugh Walker says of him that he was by nature and instinct a teacher; and that although he was too much of an artist to obtrude it or let it spoil his work, there was a didactic purpose under nearly all he wrote, verse as well as prose.[6]

The "pervasive melancholy" of his poetry which is mentioned by most of his critics was perhaps a part of Arnold's natural constitution. John W. Cunliffe says that this tendency may have been encouraged by the atmosphere of

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[5] Hugh Walker, The Age of Tennyson, p. 203.

[6] Ibid., p. 208.

otherworldliness in which Arnold grew up under his father's influence. Cunliffe tells us:

> At Oxford he was greatly affected by Newman, whose essentially sceptical mind shook Arnold's confidence in the liberal and evangelical ideas in which he had been brought up, without giving him a consolatory faith in the authority of the Catholic Church.[7]

The spirit of investigation and of new beginnings in the nineteenth century has already been mentioned. Arnold was born just at the proper time to feel the forces of change working around him. It is the critical attitude of his mind, his contemporaries say, that makes him especially the voice of the doubts and difficulties of his generation. In the case of religion, the belief in the decay of Christianity in the dogmatic sense is shown in Arnold's writings. In the case of the social system, the French Revolution had shaken it and left to the next generation the task of rebuilding it. The conception of the complexity of modern life is the dominant thought of Arnold.

Matthew Arnold was a student of Wordsworth. He followed Wordsworth as a student of nature. It is said that he admired Wordsworth's calm and his power to "possess his soul." Walker says:

> Wordsworth gave him a point of view and strengthened his power of vision. But Arnold writes his nature-poetry for a new age under new conditions. The very fact that the calm of Wordsworth

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[7] Leaders of the Victorian Revolution, p. 232.

> is unattainable imparts to his verse a subdued tone. He stands between Wordsworth and his other favorite Senancour, sharing the spiritual force of the one and the reflective melancholy of the other. Arnold's best descriptions are tinged with this melancholy.[8]

Arnold's view of nature was not the same as Wordsworth's. For Arnold, nature's "secret was not joy, but peace." "He loved nature in her quieter and more subdued moods. . . . But, above everything, what he worshipped in nature was her steadfastness and calm, ever teaching the lesson of Self-Dependence."[9]

Another influence which helped to shape Arnold's literary ideals was that of the classical Greek writers. This seems very natural when we consider the cultural influences which surrounded him. In his life, he was circumscribed by the rigid training of his youth and the fact that he spent most of his later years in a narrow although highly-cultured circle of acquaintances. Under the influence of his father, Dr. Arnold of Rugby, he gained his reverence for the classics; and "though he early threw off his views, he nevertheless inherited much of his strict, well-disciplined temperament."[10]

At Oxford, as has been mentioned, the spirit of doubt engendered by the Oxford movement took hold of him and left in him an abiding sense of regret at the passing of the old

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[8] The Age of Tennyson, p. 217.

[9] James W. Lewis, "Matthew Arnold," Cambridge History of English Literature, XIII, 110.

[10] "Introduction," Poems, p. vii.

sure faith of the unquestioning acceptance of life. Then it was that he turned to his old friends the classics.

> If there was no certain law and order in philosophy, at least here, in art, there was something fixed, some definite set of principles which it might be the business of life to discover and cherish. If the religious dogmas of his youth were, for him, gone forever, at least there were those other intimates of his boyhood, the Greek and Latin classics, which were fixed, which were true to their principles, which might be a perpetual source of inspiration and discipline. And so throughout the rest of his life . . . the habit of developing his mind and art according to a rule grew upon him.[11]

The habit of writing by rule would probably have killed his poetry had he not been by instinct a poet. As it was, most of his best poetry belongs to the earlier part of his literary career; in the end his critical faculty triumphed over his poetic instinct. Some of Arnold's rules for writing are contained in the prefaces to his volumes of poetry. In these prefaces, he explains some of the principles of the classical writers upon which he bases his own work. Lucidity was what he aimed at, above all things--classical beauty and truth of phrase and image, suggesting always, in his own words, "the pure lines of an Ionian horizon, the liquid clearness of an Ionian sky."

Arnold's remedy for the ills of his age was characteristic of his cool, reasonable mind. To see the thing as in

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[11] Ibid., pp. vii-viii.

itself it really is, to "see life steadily and see it whole," to allow the intelligence free play untouched by prejudice or sentiment over the problems of life was his aim. Arnold's definition of poetry as a "criticism of life" is borne out in his poetical practice; his poetry is primarily intellectual rather than sensuous in its appeal.

Most of Arnold's poetry is said to be the product of his young manhood, before he gave his attention to the fierce controversies of his day. While his poetic genius was maturing, his biographers say, Homer's mighty spell seized him, and his narrative poems in the epic manner show the results of long familiarity with the Greek poems.[12] "Tristram and Iseult" is a treatment of the old romance material. In it has combined romantic sentiment with classic form. This work is said to be less characteristic of the man himself than the bulk of his verse.[13] Probably we shall find little of the poet's social ideals in this revival of ancient legend such as was found in Tennyson's Idylls of the King. The modernization of Arnold's mediaeval story lies, as we have noticed, in his treatment of the characters, infusing them with nineteenth-century ideals and morals. In the further study of the poem, we shall compare Arnold's treatment with that of Tennyson and Malory.

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[12] Houston, op. cit., p. 413.

[13] Ibid.

We have seen already how Tennyson took the old mediaeval tales of knights and ladies and turned them into an allegory of human life, using them to teach his own ideals of right and wrong. Now we shall try to find how Arnold's treatment differs.

In spirit Arnold's Tristram is nearer to the Tristram of Malory's story than is Tennyson's knightly hero. Tennyson used the story of Tristram to bring out more clearly that the downfall of Arthur's realm was due to the sins of his followers. In the main Arnold has kept close to the facts of the old story, but some of his changes are radical. One change he makes is to have Iseult arrive at Tristram's sick-bed just before instead of just after his death. To the deeper sympathy of the nineteenth century it must have seemed an unnecessarily cruel fate which forbade the lovers even one last word. In Arnold's story, Tristram has returned to Brittany and to his long-neglected wife, Iseult of the White Hands. There, being wounded and sick, he dispatches a confidant to the Queen of Cornwall, to try if he could to induce her to follow him to Brittany. At this point, Arnold begins the story. Iseult of Ireland arrives at Tristram's bedside to find him dying. Tristram bids her farewell, saying:

> Now to sail the seas of Death and leave thee;
> One last kiss upon the living shore![14]

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[14] "Tristram and Isolt," Poems, p. 216.

Iseult cannot live without him and she cries:

> Tristram!--Tristram!--Stay--receive me with thee!
> Iseult leaves thee, Tristram! never more.[15]

In Tennyson's story, King Mark surprises the Queen Iseult and Tristram just as the knight is placing around her neck his tourney-prize, the ruby necklace:

> But, while he bow'd to kiss the jewell'd throat,
> Out of the dark, just as the lips had touch'd
> Behind him rose a shadow and a shriek--
> 'Mark's way,' said Mark, and clove him thro' the brain.[16]

Tennyson makes the death of the two lovers the retribution for sin, while Arnold's poem has the spirit of the old mediaeval legend, that of a deathless love over which the lovers have no control.

Another important change which Arnold makes in the Tristram legend is to give Iseult of Brittany two children. In most of the versions of the old legend, Tristram remains faithful to his first Iseult, and his mistaken marriage is a marriage in name only. Arnold succeeds in making his hero at once

> The peerless hunter, harper, knight,
> Tristram of Lyonesse, . . .[17]

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[15] Ibid.

[16] "The Last Tournament," Works, p. 216.

[17] "Tristram and Iseult," Poems, p. 204.

and a nineteenth century gentleman who does not neglect the wife that he has married. He is a conscientious husband and father; but still he cannot forget his first love—Iseult of Ireland. When he is dying, he is overcome by the desire to see her once more.

After Tristram's death, Iseult of Brittany seeks consolation in devoting herself to her children.

> And now she will go home, and softly lay
> Her laughing children in their beds, and play
> Awhile with them before they sleep; and then
> She'll light her silver lamp, which fisherman
> Dragging their nets through the rough waves, afar,
> Along their iron coast, know like a star,
> And take her broidery frame, and there she'll sit
> Hour after hour, her gold curls sweeping it,
> Lifting her soft-bent head only to mind
> Her children or to listen to the wind.[18]

Many critics have called the story of Iseult's children merely an irrelevant addition, and have said that it detracts from the mediaeval legend. Instead of detracting, however, it seems to add another tragedy to that of the parted lovers—the tragedy of the unloved and forgotten Iseult, none the less tragic because it ends so peacefully in the tales she tells to the children "under the hollies, that bright winter's day."

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[18] Ibid., p. 220.

In Tennyson's story, Tristram dismisses Iseult of the White Hands with a few words:

> Did I love her? the name at least I loved.
> Isolt?—I fought his battles for Isolt!
> The night was dark; the true star set.
> Isolt!
> The name was ruler of the dark—Isolt?
> Care not for her! patient, and prayerful,
> meek,
> Pale-blooded, she will yield herself to
> God.[19]

Tennyson's heroine must console herself with fasting and prayer, while Arnold's bereaved Iseult has her children to love and care for. In this respect Arnold's story seems the more modern of the two.

Another change, and a seemingly unnecessary one, which Arnold makes in his story is to transform the blond Iseult of mediaeval romance to a raven-haired beauty. Iseult the Blond, of whose golden hair a swallow bore a strand in its beak to Mark, becomes in Arnold's poem a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman.[20]

> O'er the blanch'd sheet her raven hair
> Lies in disorder'd streams.[21]

Tennyson, also, in "The Last Tournament," made Tristram drawn away from his wife by the "black-blue Irish hair and Irish eyes" of his first love.

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[19] "The Last Tournament," Works, p. 431.

[20] Maynadier, op. cit., p. 386.

[21] "Tristram and Iseult," Poems, p. 217.

As has been mentioned already, Tennyson has made no reference to the love-potion, which plays an important part in the mediaeval legend. Arnold, however, brings it into his poem. He tells us that Iseult of Ireland "had quaff'd with Tristram that spiced magic draught,

> Which since then forever rolls
> Through their blood, and binds their souls.[22]

Arnold, as did the old romancers, excuses all the sins of the lovers because their souls are bound together by the "magic drought." When Tristram lies upon his death-bed, watching and listening for his love, he asks himself, "Does the love-draught work no more?" But it has not lost its magic; for she is drawn to him at last. The dying Tristram tells Iseult that he feels the end approaching. His farewell is:

> But since living we are ununited,
> Go not far, O Iseult! from my grave.[23]

Iseult, preferring death to separation, cries to him:

> Iseult leaves thee, Tristram! never more.[24]

Then she falls dead upon his corpse. Their death-bed is watched over by the "stately Huntsman, clad in green," upon a ghostlike tapestry.[25]

We have said that Arnold endows his mediaeval characters with nineteenth-century feelings. When they speak and act,

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[22] Ibid., p. 205.

[23] Ibid., p. 216.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., p. 217.

we feel that they are modern men and women faced with modern problems. In the character of Iseult of Brittany, we see a woman neglected, struggling on with longings ever unsatisfied. She shows more self-control than the Iseult of the Middle Ages probably would have shown. In the old stories she shows a different spirit, as in those versions of the tale she knowingly misrepresents the color of the sail which was bringing her rival to her husband's bedside. Arnold calls her the "sweetest Christian alive." Tristram calls her "kind and good" even though he says, "Ah! not the Iseult I desire."[26]

Tennyson pictures Iseult of Brittany as pale-blooded and prayerful, her hand "as cool and white as any flower." Tristram says her name allured him first. In Tennyson's story she is a snow maiden, unmoved by the troubles and sorrows of earth. She never seems real to us in Tennyson's version of the story. Like Tennyson's Arthur, his Isolt of the White Hands is the personification of purity and goodness. Her sufferings leave us unmoved, because we never feel them as actual sufferings. Arnold has made her more human, even though she is still a mild and "patient flower."

The other Iseult, Iseult of Ireland, Arnold pictures as proud and petulant. Of her he says:

> Let her sweep her dazzling hand
> With its gesture of command,

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[26] Ibid., p. 204.

And shake back her raven hair
With the old imperious air.[27]

And yet he makes her a far nobler character than the Irish Queen of Tennyson's Idylls. In Arnold's poem, Iseult asks,

What, thou think'st this aching brow was cooler,
Circled, Tristram, by a band of gold?[28]

Which, she asks him has the heavier burden, he an exile in the forest, or she a smiling queen upon the throne? Instead of blaming her, we sympathize, because she is a victim of circumstances over which she has no control.

Tennyson's Isolt is a fiery, passionate beauty, violent both in her love and in her hate. Speaking of her husband she says:

My God, the measure of my hate for Mark
Is as the measure of my love for thee![29]

Apparently, she never feels that she has wronged Mark in being unfaithful to him; while Arnold's Iseult calls Mark, "my deep-wrong'd husband,"[30] Tennyson pictures Isolt as quick to anger and jealousy. When Tristram stirs her jealous anger because of his marriage, she tries to provoke him to equal jealousy by comparing him to Lancelot, whom she calls the "knightliest of all knights." Indeed, Tennyson's Isolt of Ireland is far from being an admirable character. She is romantic passion uncontrolled, showing us by contrast the purity of Isolt of the White Hands.

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[27] Ibid., pp. 206-207. [28] Ibid., p. 215.

[29] "The Last Tournament," Works, p. 430.

[30] "Tristram and Iseult," Poems, p. 214.

Tristram, the hero of the story, also undergoes a great change between Arnold's and Tennyson's treatments. Arnold's Tristram is nearer to the mediaeval knight of the old tales, even though he is also a nineteenth-century man "with a secret in his breast." In one scene we see him fighting by Arthur's side, surrounded by neighing steeds, exchanging blow for blow. There he is the typical legendary knight. In another scene we find him

> In the forest depths alone;
> The chase neglected, and his hound
> Crouch'd beside him on the ground
> Ah, what trouble's on his brow?
> Hither let him wander now,
> Hither, to the quiet hours
> Pass'd among these heaths of ours
> By the grey Atlantic sea.[31]

In this picture, he is the more introspective modern man, fighting out his battles alone.

Tennyson makes Tristram an inferior character. He mocks at Lancelot for his melancholy moods and tells him, "Be happy in thy fair Queen as I in mine."[32] Instead of the single-hearted lover of the old romance, Tennyson pictures him as very near to insincerity when he muses on "how to smooth and sleek his marriage over to the queen." Again, we feel him not quite admirable when he excuses himself for breaking his vow to Arthur and playing false to Mark by saying lightly, "My Soul, we love but while we may."[33]

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[31] Ibid., p. 209.

[32] "The Last Tournament," Works, p. 425. [33] Ibid., p. 432.

His sin is no greater than that of Lancelot, and yet we fail to feel the same sympathy for him that we have for the "peerless knight." Perhaps this is because we see Lancelot suffering because of his treachery; whereas Tristram seems to feel no remorse of conscience.

The character of Mark does not appear in Arnold's poem. We see him only through what others say of him. We know that he has banished Tristram from his realm, but this seems only just. Then, when Iseult expresses the feeling that she has deeply wronged him, we feel that he, like the other Iseult, is suffering through no fault of his own. In Arnold's poem, Mark has the dead lovers buried in his own chapel; which is very much like one of the old legends.

Tennyson pictures Mark as a fiend in human form. Isolt tells Tristram that Mark would have "scratch'd, bitten, blinded, marr'd her somehow had it not been for his dread of Tristram. She tells of his stealing up behind her in the dark, hissing at her the news of Tristram's marriage. This is "Mark's way," as the death scene shows. In Tennyson's story, Mark is as much a personification of evil as are Modred and Vivien. We can feel no sympathy for a fiend. Isolt warns Tristram:

> and when thou passest any wood
> Close vizor, lest an arrow from the bush
> Should leave me all alone with Mark and hell.[34]

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[34] Ibid., p. 430.

In this study, we have seen how two writers of the same literary period, surrounded by the same social forces, have taken the same material and have given us something very different. Their differing points of view must have come about, we feel, from those very personal influences which surrounded their early lives. Both were educated, scholarly men, deeply interested in the questions of their day. And yet Tennyson makes his work a highly spiritualized theme while Arnold builds his story by the methods and principles of Greek art.

Next, we shall see how a writer of our own day treats the same material which has been handled so often since the days of the ancient bards.

CHAPTER VI

ROBINSON

A number of other writers since Matthew Arnold have treated the Arthurian legends. We shall mention only a few. Swinburne used a portion of the material in his "Tristram of Lyonesse" and "Tale of Balen." James Russell Lowell based his "Vision of Sir Launfal" upon the "Holy Grail." Another American who made use of the legends was Richard Hovey. He announced his plan to write an Arthurian "poem in dramas." Only four of these have been published, two masques, "The Quest of Merlin" and "Taliensin," and two five-act plays, "The Marriage of Guinevere" and "The Birth of Galahad." More recently Thomas Hardy in England has made use of the "Tristram" legend in his play in verse called "The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall." Poets are still finding in the old themes material upon which to base their theories of life and love and religion. The next poet which we shall consider is a man of our own time, Edwin Arlington Robinson. In this study, we have seen how the ancient writers developed the stories of King Arthur and his court; then we have seen how the Victorian poets have treated the same theme; and now we shall attempt to learn how a twentieth-century poet makes use of such ancient

material. In approaching this modern treatment of an old story, we naturally wonder what the writer's point of view is; and, if it is different from those of the poets who preceded him, we ask ourselves why it should be so. We are interested to learn what portion of the Arthurian material the poet has selected for his use and how he has treated the stories which he has selected. We shall expect his treatment to be different from that of the nineteenth-century writers, if we stop to consider some of the great changes which have taken place in the world within our own century, and what influence these changes would have upon the work of a serious student of modern problems.

The nineteenth century has been called a time of awakening and of transition; and the twentieth century, then, might be characterized as a time of questioning and of experimentation, the questioning of all our old accepted standards and experimentation in every field of science. The early years of this century saw, perhaps, only a continuation and deepening of the spirit of the former century; but the upheaval brought about by the World War has left its mark upon our present time and upon the literature of our day.

Walt Whitman is usually thought of as the father of the "new" American poetry. In discussing the variety which has distinguished American poetry of the twentieth century, Louis Untermeyer tells us that if Whitman acted as a sharp precipitant upon American literature, he himself was pre-

cipitated by the conventions of his day. The New England poets, he tells us, had withdrawn into their libraries; "turning their tired eyes from the troubled domestic scene to a rose-tinted Europe, transporting themselves to a prettified past, abandoning original writing for translation and other methods of evasion."[1] Then upon the scene appeared Whitman, who cried out in protest against those who were seeking glamour not in man's life but in other men's books. Untermeyer says:

> It was an inclusive nationalism that Whitman championed--not an arrogant chauvinism. It is to his credit--and, to a greater extent than has been acknowledged, to the spiritual influence of Emerson--that our literature has become so frankly indigenous. We have, to-day, art in America that is, differing from the imitative product of the past generations, actually American.[2]

Until recently, according to the above mentioned author, our art had to be rearrangements of French or Italian paintings, our architecture, reproductions of classical style, and our music, echoes from German airs. And the poetry scarcely differed from the other arts in its absence of individuality. Even the famous New England group, this writer feels, "lacked that intense impact of personality without which great art has never been produced."[3]

Perhpas the strongest factor that prevented these Americans from expressing themselves fully was a formula

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[1] American Poetry Since 1900, p. 3.

[2] Ibid., p. 4.

[3] Ibid., p. 5.

of conduct that was rooted in puritanism. In studying the history of this period of American life, we find that this puritanism developed both into a literary dictatorship and a religious tyranny. It was the era of the moral tale, when literature was conceived as an aid to politics or religion. It was this sermonizing turn which, according to the literary critics, kept this gifted group from becoming either the artistic pioneers or the prophets of a new country. As it was, this New England group did not owe nearly as much to New England as it did to Old England.

The poetry of to-day shows quite a different trend. It has swung back to actuality and to democracy. This return to the material of everyday life and to direct speech came together. Walt Whitman with his "glory of the commonplace" was the prophet of this new ideal. The poet of to-day no longer shows an enforced deference to a "poetic poet." He has become the child of his own age, looking candidly at the world he lives in and studying its many problems, problems brought about by the amazing fusion of races and ideas and the limitless miracles of science. "But, above all, what distinguishes this age is its probing quality, its insatiable lust for knowledge, its determined self-analysis."[4]

It is typical of this polyglot nation of ours that it should produce such a man as the poet Edwin Arlington Robin-

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[4] Ibid., p. 11.

son. Like the country and the age which produced him, the man is made up of contradictions. In him, we have a blending of the old and the new; the spirit of the early Puritan combined with the technique of a modern psychologist. His work combines light and darkness, faith and skepticism, tragedy, and comedy. Alfred Kreymborg calls him a "tragi-comedian." He says: "A tragi-comedian is the subtlest and most difficult of men to comprehend, and the haze which greeted Robinson was due to the continued immaturity of the American mind."[5] Let us see if a study of the personal background of the man will help us to a better understanding of his point of view and the most outstanding characteristics of his work. A sympathetic biography called E. A. R., written by Laura E. Richards, tells us of Robinson's early life.

Edward Arlington Robinson was born at Head Tide, Maine, but as he was only six months old when his family moved to Gardiner; that town claims him as her son.

His father was a man of substance and position, his mother a rare and lovely woman. Both had bookish tastes; in the pleasant house on Lincoln Street, the library grew with the children. It was a cheerful and cultivated home. Horace Dean, the eldest of the three boys in the family, was

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[5] A History of American Poetry, p. 298.

to be a physician when he grew up; Herman was to take charge of his father's real estate business; and Edwin--no one knew precisely what he was to be, probably something connected with books. We are told that at five he was reading "The Raven" to his mother; at seven he had discovered Shakespeare; at eleven he was writing verses; and at sixteen he was beginning to realize that this was the thing he was to do.

Perhaps the first tragedy which Robinson met was the death of one of his closest boyhood friends, who died at the age of eleven. This death, Miss Richards thinks, may have cast the first shadow on the boy's sensitive mind, may have first waked the sombre questionings which were never to be stilled.

Edwin Robinson entered high school in 1884. He is variously described at that age as: "The boy whom everyone liked"; "who was always quiet"; "who was different"; and "who had a far-away look in his nice face of some things more poetic than geometry."

In 1891, Robinson went to Harvard, where he remained for two years. Then came another crisis in his life, the loss of his father and, at the same time, the loss of the family fortune. While still in Harvard he began to suffer from mastoiditis, which resulted in depriving him permanently of hearing in the affected ear. His dislike of general society, which has been noticed, may well have been on ac-

count of this disability. Whether because of illness, or from lack of money, or both, in 1893, Edwin Robinson left Harvard and returned to his home in Maine.

Tragedy seems to have haunted this period of his life; for, in 1896, came the death of his mother, from what was known as black diphtheria. Then, in 1899, Dean, the brilliant eldest brother, died. And only ten years later, Herman, who had a wife and two small daughters, died in what should have been the prime of his life. Is it any wonder that the poet should have come to feel the futility of life.

After this, there was nothing to bind him to his old home. He went to New York and set himself doggedly to the winning of success.[6] Miss Richards says:

> He took the town and the countryside with him. New England was in his blood, her granite in his bones. Open his volumes almost anywhere you will (except in the Arthurian romance), you find somewhere the singing pinetree, the whispering water, the rugged, grave, kindly folk.[7]

At first glance, Robinson seems one of the least American of our modern poets. He uses with few variations the traditional English forms. He is said to have been a disciple of Robert Browning; but apparently the younger poet has derived from the Victorian writer not his philosophy but his lyric form. "But beneath this superficial indebtedness," says Louis Untermeyer, "no living writer has

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[6] E. A. R., pp. 3-60.

[7] Ibid., p. 60.

achieved a more personal and a more indigenous idion."[8] Robinson takes patterns that are anything but unusual and makes them, somehow, as original as if they had been devised by him.

One of the outstanding features of Robinson's work is his affection for the "inferior wraiths" of life. In an age which exalts the successful man, Robinson lauds or at least lifts the failure. The Collected Poems is crowded with his tributes to those "beloved of none, forgot by many." Kreymborg observes:

> His favorite character is the man who fails while seeking the highest light. He is constantly absorbed in these quasi-immortal failures, and through them the failure of even the best of beings to survive the outlines of time. His art is salutory in its austere devotion to intangible truth and its downright acceptance of the defeat of the noblest of characters. But the defeat is also a triumph, and the Robinsonian character a small hero groping through time and eternity.[9]

The man Flammonde is one of Robinson's immortal failures. He is in a sense mysterious, as are many of Robinson's characters. Flammonde is a symbol of the modern Christ, a man who never himself succeeded in the world, but who touched the lives of others magically into success.

> What was he, when we came to sift
> His meaning, and to note the drift
> Of incommunicable ways

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8 The New Era in American Poetry, p. 111.

9 A History of American Poetry, p. 299.

That makes us ponder while we praise?
Why was it that his charm revealed
Somehow the surface of a shield?
What was it that we never caught?
What was he, and what was he not?[10]

Thus we have the man, mysterious, aloof, somehow withheld from his own destiny, and yet transforming the lives of those around him.

Robinson's Merlin is a failure because he knows too much, and yet cannot avert the doom which threatens Camelot. Lancelot's tragedy is that of the man who achieves clarity without gaining strength.[11]

According to Kreymborg, Robinson is one of the principal characters in his own work. "He is a night in the tournament which destroyed not only Camelot, but which threatens to destory his own land in the midst of its apparent victories."[12] Here, at the height of the greatest material triumph in history, comes a man who insists that the triumph is temporal and that final defeat is inevitable. The very virtues that reared the edifice, the poet insists, contain the vices to undermine and destory it. Both "Merlin" and "Lancelot" were written under the influence of the World War; and the collapse of Arthur's realm seems to be a fore-

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[10] "Flammonde," The Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson, edition of 1929, p. 5. (Hereafter this edition will be referred to as Collected Poems.)

[11] Mark Van Doren, Edwin Arlington Robinson, p. 71.

[12] A History of American Poetry, p. 299.

shadowing of the downfall of our own civilization with a new order only dimly seen in the distance.

Robinson has often been charged with pessimism and cynicism. His stories, it is true, are predominantly tragic because he is so greatly interested in human failures, and because he writes with an unrelieved austerity of manner. Under the spell of his mood, the reader finds it impossible to forget the seriousness of life on earth. Robinson himself asserted that the label of pessimism could have been placed on him by none but "superficial critics."[13] The important thing to him is not whether we succeed or fail, but rather it is the desire or the motive which impels us to achievement. His little poem "Credo," which appears in the early volume, The Children of the Night, illuminates for us somewhat his philosophy.

> No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,
> For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears,
> The black and awful chaos of the night;
> For through it all—above, beyond it all—
> I know the far-sent message of the years,
> I feel the coming of the Light.[14]

The poet is particularly fond of the image of light. Often he speaks of "the light" and "the gleam" toward which his characters struggle in a troubled world. Ideally the

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[13] Van Doren, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

[14] "Credo," Collected Poems, p. 94.

world for him is filled with pure white light; but in reality he is aware that it is for the most part dark.[15]

It is well known that Robinson's picture of life is not a cheerful one; and yet before we accuse him of cheap cynicism, we should remember something of his inherited prejudices and his early training. His Puritan spirit is often at war with his probing, active mind. The result, we are reminded by his work, is a profound melancholy tinged with skepticism. In speaking of the pervading mood of Robinson's poems, Howard W. Cook says:

> Self-analysis has sapped joy, and the impossibility of constructing an ethical system in accordance both with desire and with tradition has twisted the mental vision out of all true proportion. It takes the lifetime of more than one individual to throw off a superstition, and the effort to do so is not made without sacrifice.[16]

Bruce Weirick, one of the least sympathetic of Robinson's critics, calls the poet's philosophy a "library culture." Weirick criticizes the poet as not being social-minded, not thinking seriously of his time, or of labor, class wars, poverty, or the destiny of these states.[17]

Perhaps the most important feature of Robinson's work is his brilliant analysis of character. In his short poems,

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[15] Van Doren, op. cit., p. 30.

[16] Howard Williard Cook, Our Poets of Today, p. 34.

[17] Weirick, From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry, p. 192.

his character delineations are done with a few clipped phrases, typical of the speech of his New England forebears. The poem "Miniver Cheevy" is only one of his many shrewd etchings of character:

> Miniver Cheevy, born too late,
> Scratched his head and kept
> on thinking;
> Miniver coughed, and called it fate,
> And kept on drinking.[18]

In his longer poems, Robinson makes his psyohological analysis of character and the motives which impel his characters to action the important features of his stories. He takes his people apart down to the last detail and puts them together again. Often his over-minute attention to the psychology of character hinders the progress of his narrative. We lose ourselves in a maze of reveries and personal analyses of the actors.

The Robinson heroines are more real than the heroes; and his devils are more convincing than his saints. Woman is often the devil in Robinson's view. Sometimes he pictures her as leading man down to hell, sometimes as drawing him up toward heaven. Most of his women are the devils to whom the serpent has handed the apple of knowledge. When the enchanted world of Vivien and Merlin collapses around them, her tragedy appears more vivid than his. She is Eve driven forth from Eden. She says:

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[18] "Miniver Cheevy," Collected Poems, p. 347.

I contemplate
Another name for this forbidden place,
And one more fitting. Tell me if you find it,
Some fitter name than Eden. We have had
A man and woman in it for some time,
And now it seems, we have a Tree of Knowledge.[19]

Robinson's heroes sometimes seem like mere puppets who speak the poet's theories of love and life, puppets which he uses for psychological analysis. The men are haunted by doubts and dreads, and are immature compared with the women. Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram are American men of the intellectual type. So are the men of the modern narratives. Kreymborg says of them: "They are all failures and frustrates, and employ the measured accents of a noble defeatism."[20]

Some of the most noticeable characteristics of Robinson's poetry seem contradictions in themselves. Side by side we have examples of his New England terseness of speech and of his flashing brilliance of phrasing. He has gone on, unperturbed by the battle over new forms, using the old forms and making them distinctively his own. Speaking of the poet's style, Louis Untermeyer says:

> Usually Robinson is not only economic but actually close-fisted with his clipped phrases; sometimes in his desire to get rid of excess verbiage, he throws away everything but the meaning--and keeps that to himself.[21]

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[19] "Merlin," Collected Poems, p. 294.

[20] A History of American Poetry, p. 313.

[21] American Poetry Since 1900, p. 42.

Robinson was one of the first to express himself in that hard clear utterance which was adopted, later on, as one of the chief articles in the creed of the Imagists. He uses, as was mentioned before, the traditional English forms of verse. Untermeyer says, "There are lines when he seems to be speaking with the accent of Robert Browning in the rhythms of W. S. Gilbert."[22] The reader may be sure of finding in his work the faultless meter, the vivid phrase, and the masterly rhyme. His lines flow along as easily and p pointedly as a sharp conversation. His precise and almost astringent tone is a part of his New England heritage. His idioms are sometimes difficult to understand. For example, he speaks of a hypodermic needle as a "slight kind of engine." Of this peculiar pe sonal idiom Untermeyer says: "It is not because Robinson is fond of words that he indulges in such roundabout rhetoric; it is the occasional mistake of an essentially direct mind in an effort to avoid baldness."[23]

His poems are a complete refutation of the theory that nothing psychological, nothing "new" can be expressed in the old forms; that rhyme and a regular rhythm will, in a few years, be practically obsolete.

> Such brilliant and analytic verse as Robinson's completely explodes the fallacy that a poet who wishes to give expression to realities in modern life—will find that he is confined for his literary expression to the two media of prose and free verse.[24]

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[22] Ibid., p. 42.

[23] Ibid., p. 43.

[24] Ibid., p. 56.

Robinson's humor is a blending of tragedy and comedy. It expresses itself in his ironic characterizations and in his whimsical philosophizing over people and their motives. We laugh with him over the idiosyncrasies of his Bewick Finzers, his Fleming Helphenstines, and his pathetic Isaacs and Archibalds; and yet his sympathy makes us share the pathos of these bewildered figures. Untermeyer says: "If Robinson had written nothing but these intimate portrayals, his title to the first rank in our literature would still be secure."[25]

In this study, we have attempted to learn why a twentieth-century poet's point of view should be different from that of the Victorian writers. We have studied the problems which surrounded each, and the personal influence which aided in the development of each character. We have found that each writer's point of view has been entirely different. In the next two chapters, we shall attempt to analyze the poems themselves, in order to see how Robinson's treatment differs from those of the other writers which we have studied.

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25 Ibid., p. 49.

CHAPTER VII

ROBINSON'S TREATMENT OF THE ARTHURIAN STORY

In 1917 came "Merlin," the first of Robinson's Arthurian poems. "Lancelot" followed three years later, and "Tristram" seven years after "Lancelot." These three long poems make a series of compositions on the ancient themes of love and war at King Arthur's court. There was every reason why a poet of Robinson's type should become interested in Camelot and the great legendary figures whose fates were settled there, so the stories go, before history began. Camelot and the court of Arthur are not merely subjects rich with associations which appeal to poets generally; to Robinson they are a background against which he can project his romance of human motive. Camelot is more than Camelot to him; Merlin, Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere are more than mere archaic puppets; the Holy Grail is more than a light which romantic men go trailing after for nothing save romance. Mark Van Doren says: "Camelot is a stage set by Robinson on which to display the whole sublime body of his tragic vision."[1]

Robinson has made the legends distinctively his own, and plays upon the old themes with the instrumentation of a

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[1] Edwin Arlington Robinson, p. 67.

modern psychologist. Van Doren says that Robinson's treatment of the Arthurian themes has no equal "in all of the poetry since the Middle Ages which has treated those themes."[2]

We have seen how both Tennyson and Arnold took the mediaeval knights and ladies and made them into nineteenth-century men and women, speaking the language and having the morals of the Victorian age. Tennyson used the old tales to teach a moral lesson; and Arnold used them, as he did all his poetry, as a "criticism of life." And now comes Robinson, a twentieth-century poet, who transforms the same characters into twentieth-century people, speaking a modern language and having modern ideals.

It is a mistake to consider Robinson's poems as merely an attempt to retell the Arthurian legends. Instead, the poet makes of them an observation of human character and experience in terms of what he considers their universal significance. In them, the poet is concerned, not with specific character, but with the universal types of men and women; not with the effect of experience upon the individaul spirit, but with the epic of human destiny. In speaking of the point of view of these poems Lloyd Morris observes:

> They are an expression, and a singularly modern expression, of the perpetually recurrent moods of the

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2 Ibid., p. 66.

> human spirit in its gesture toward immortality, of the enduring aspirations to beauty, to knowledge, to freedom, through which it seeks to resolve the final meaning of life.[3]

As we have said, both "Merlin" and "Lancelot" were written under the influence of the World War, and they are pictures of a world in chaos. They present a view of the collapse of a civilization, with the distintegration of its ideals, and the failure of its human relationships. In the aftermath of Arthur's wars, we are reminded of the crashing impact of the World War upon our own social institutions. Our inability to control experience by our vaunted intelligence is reflected by the poet in Merlin's forlorn inability to bring any power to bear to avert the doom overhanging Camelot.

"Merlin" depicts the ruin of Arthur's kingdom when it is forsaken by its wise leader; "Lancelot" presents the final crash, the toppling of old orders and ideals. Definitely symbolic, the two poems have various implications. Whether the leading theme is the crumbling of beauty and idealism, a civilization destroyed by the intrigues that brought about the European war; or whether it is a parable of the conflict between "Woman and the light that Galahad found," the struggle between the forces that impel desire and action is eloquently projected. Robinson has discarded the miracle-working,

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3 The Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, p. 47.

mystic elements of the story of the Grail. It has become merely a symbol of a light that leads men on, luring them to ideals as yet undefined, but clear enough to make them dissatisfied with the existing social order.

The Arthurian conception of the average reader is still largely Tennysonian, in spite of the twentieth-century critics who have included the Idylls in their revolt against "Victorianism." Such a reader, as a rule, gives little thought to the long history of the story of Arthur. Usually Malory is little known and the legends read only in adaptations. "In one respect certainly," says Miss E. Edith Pipkin, "our high schools have done their work well. The timeless figures of Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot, and Merlin are seen through Tennysonian glasses."[4]

Accordingly, when Robinson decided to rehandle the Arthurian legends, he found his reading public emotionally conditioned by Tennyson. He was judged, so Miss Pipkin says, in terms of Tennyson: he was either like or unlike Tennyson, not so good as Tennyson, or better than Tennyson.[5] Eventually, however, it was recognized not only that Robinson is very unlike Tennyson, but that he has given a highly individual view of King Arthur's realm.

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[4] "The Arthur of Edwin Arlington Robinson," The English Journal, XIX, 183.

[5] Ibid.

Robinson has given us a modern complex group of Arthurian characters; moreover, he has breated a new spirit into the legends themselves. He is dealing with modern standards and modern complexities of thought. In such a world the ethics of tournaments, battle fields, and courtly love have little place. Miss Pipkin observes:

> Instead of Malory's frank delight in a good fight, of Tennyson's sublimation of the idea of war, he introduces a new element into Arthurian story: utter war weariness.[6]

In the castle of Joyous Gard, whither they have fled from Arthur's wrath, Guinevere expresses to Lancelot her horror of war:

> Tomorrow, it will be
> The King's move, I suppose, and we shall have
> One more magnificent waste of nameless pawns,
> And of a few more knights. God how you love
> This game!--to make so loud a shambles of it,
> When you have only twice to lift your finger
> To signal piece, and give to this poor drenched
> And clotted earth a time to heal itself.
> Twice over I say to you, if war be war,
> Why play with it?[7]

But if the World War brought about the collapse of intelligence, it served, also, to turn men's eyes inward in a discovery of faith. This search for an ideal revelation of the meaning of life is the integrating philosophy of the poems. The "light that lures men" becomes the attainment of ideal values in this troubled world of ours.

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[6] Ibid., p. 192.

[7] "Lancelot," Collected Poems, p. 405.

The element of tragedy in the poems is a tragedy of the spirit. It depends upon some fatal weakness in the characters themselves. Nevertheless, the tragedy is very real, that of a highly integrated personality doomed to spiritual failure. This is illustrated more clearly in the failure of Merlin to live up to his highest light than anywhere else in the poems. Merlin sees all, but he is powerless to alter the destiny that awaits.

"Merlin"

"Merlin" was the first of Robinson's Arthurian poems. In it the poet has retold the story of Arthur, Merlin, and Vivien, altering the outlines of the traditional tale very little, but reading new meanings into the situation. He has chosen for the time of his narrative the eve of the downfall of Arthur's court. Merlin, after the ten years spent with Vivien in Broceliande, has returned with the purpose of again lending Arthur his counsel; but in thinking over the problem, he comes to see that he is powerless to avert the catastrophe threatening Arthur's realm; and he turns back without seeing the King, leaving him to the fate he has prepared for himself.

Robinson dispenses with the fairy-tale element so conspicuous in most versions of the Arthurian material. He is not particularly interested in the legend that Merlin, miraculously born and early endowed with powers of propheoy

foretold all that would happen to Camelot and its king in the way that fortune-tellers foretell events. Robinson makes him no more miraculous than any of the men whom he has created to play leading tragic roles. Merlin and Vivien jest lightly that his father was a devil and her mother a fay; but it is merely idle banter to cover their more serious emotions. Merlin boasts to Vivien of his powers, like one small boy desiring to impress another:

> I'm willing cheerfully
> To fight, left-handed, Hell's three headed hound
> If you but whistle him up from where he lives;
> I'm cheerful and I'm fierce, and I've made kings;
> And some have said my father was the Devil,
> Though I believe it not. Whatever I am,
> I have not lived in Time until to-day.[8]

The modern Merlin is a little amused, a little saddened by Arthur's superstitious respect for the vision which, after all, foresaw no more than wise men see at any time. Merlin goes to the King because, as he observes to Vivien,

> The King believes today, as in his boyhood,
> That I am Fate; and I can do no more
> Than show again what in his heart he knows.[9]

For a time Merlin luxuriates in the flattery of Vivien's attentions, the sense appeal of her beauty, and the creature comforts of the life at Broceliande. But this life of idleness and ease disintegrates his moral and spiritual fiber. When Arthur sees him, beardless and arrayed in purple

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[8] "Merlin," Collected Poems, p. 265.

[9] Ibid., p. 282.

silk, he feels that the old Merlin is gone forever. The King sees in Merlin "a pathos of lost authority." He observes to himself:

> I might as well have left him in his grave,
> As he would say it, saying what was true--
> As death is true. This Merlin is not mine,
> But Vivien's. My crown is less than hers,
> And I am less than woman to this man.[10]

Still Arthur is unable to free himself from his life-long awe of Merlin. Merlin dares to tell the King the truth, a thing no other person can do; and at length Arthur assures himself:

> But you are Merlin still, or part of him;
> I did you wrong when I thought otherwise,
> And I am sorry now.[11]

Thus Arthur gives the reason why Merlin cannot be happy in a life of dalliance. He is Merlin still, and his superior intellect will let him have no peace. He tries to reach a personal happiness by disavowing his qualities of insight and wisdom and by turning his back upon the world of thought. At last, however, he realizes that happiness is not attained that way; that for him, perhaps, there is no such thing as personal happiness. Then he turns his back on Broceliande forever.

Innumerable tales of magic gathered around the figure of Merlin in the old legends. A brief consideration of the older versions enables us to see more clearly the changes

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[10] Ibid., p. 250.

[11] Ibid., p. 251.

which Robinson has made in the character of the prophet and seer of the old Celtic tales. In them, we are told that Merlin's father was a devil straight from hell. Merlin was to have been the means of circumventing Arthur and the chivalric ideal; but through his mother's prayers he was turned from his evil designs, and Modred became the instrument of evil. Although Merlin frequently resorted to deeds of magic, he was regarded more seriously as a prophet, his dire predictions frequently striking terror to the hearts of his listeners.[12]

The Vivien of Robinson's poem is neither the innocent Nimue of Malory's story, nor yet the malicious creature which Tennyson portrays. She is a modern complex woman of conflicting impulses. She has both a capacity for scheming and a willingness to sacrifice herself for love. At times she seems innocent and naive; at other times a very sophisticated woman, making demands to test her powers. In her the possessive instinct is highly developed. She will brook no rival; she must be first or not at all. She is jealous of Merlin's regard for Arthur. Of the King she says:

> I wonder if I understand
> This king of yours, with all his pits and dragons
> I know I do not like him.[13]

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[12] Pipkin, op. cit., p. 187.

[13] "Merlin," Collected Poems, p. 289.

When Merlin first comes to Vivien in Broceliande, she feels as if a miracle has taken place. Like any palpitating maiden she says to herself:

> I'm frightened, sure enough, but if I show it,
> I'll be no more the Vivien for whose love
> He tossed away his glory, or the Vivien
> Who saw no man alive to make her love him
> Till she saw Merlin once in Camelot,
> And seeing him, saw no other.[14]

Yet after Vivien has proved to herself that she is first with Merlin, she does not like the Merlin she has changed. Incredulously she asks herself:

> Was this the Merlin who for years and years
> Before she found him had so made her love him
> That kings and princes, thrones and diadems,
> And honorable men who drowned themselves
> For love, were less to her than melon-shells?[15]

It is a part of Merlin's tragedy that Vivien shall see him as he is, old and shorn of his former fame and glory. In the end, he sees himself as he is and acknowledges himself to be a failure. He observes to Dagonet, the fool:

> I saw; but I was neither Fate nor God.
> I saw too much; and this would be the end,
> Were there to be an end. I saw myself—
> A sight no other man has ever seen.[16]

Robinson says nothing of the supernatural charm which the earlier versions make so much of. Vivien's attractions are the magic which holds Merlin in Broceliande, and not any mysterious spell of waving arms and mysterious passes.

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[14] Ibid., p. 263.

[15] Ibid., p. 296.

[16] Ibid., p. 313.

"Lancelot"

In "Lancelot" Robinson has continued the story of Camelot which he begins in "Merlin." The story opens at the period in the Arthurian triangle when Lancelot, who has seen the Grail, has determined to leave Camelot and Guinevere forever and follow the lonely marsh-light that the knights hail as the true gleam. Guinevere tempts him out of this purpose. Arthur and his knights return to the court and find what the king has shut his eyes to so long. Lancelot flees, and Arthur orders Guinevere to be burned at the stake. Lancelot returns and rescues her, taking her to his castle of Joyous Gard. Later he surrenders her to the king, at the Bishop's order. But the poison of the situation has raised up enemies in the king's own household, especially his illegitimate son, Modred. Lancelot, persuaded too late to go to the king's aid, arrives after the battle in the north, in which both Arthur and Modred receive their death wounds. He pays one last visit to Guinevere in the nunnery at Almesbury. He tries to persuade her to go away with him to France, but she refuses. Then the knight rides away under the stars.

> There was nothing.
> But always in the darkness he rode on,
> Alone; and in the darkness came the Light.[17]

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17 "Lancelot," Collected Poems, p. 449.

Usually the Arthurian stories depict Arthur as the monarch, the head of the chivalric society at Camelot. The early chronicles devoted themselves to his personal exploits, but the emphasis soon shifted from Arthur the man to Arthur the King. Malory's Arthur starts his career as an individual, but the position soon engulfs the man. Engrossed in the cares of the state, he is blind to the human crisis that is threatening his own household.

In his Arthur, Tennyson, as we have seen, gives us an idealized conception of a king working a high purpose in a world of sin. Tennyson omits altogether, as not fitting the character of his stainless king, the story of Arthur's sin and the birth of Modred as his son. Another deed which Tennyson omits is Arthur's attempt to burn the Queen. Robinson's story of Arthur is in many respects more akin to Malory's version than to Tennyson's. As in Malory's story, Arthur is represented as the father of Modred, a fact which is generally known at the court. Also, Robinson, like Malory, brings out the story of Arthur's attempt to have Guinevere burned at the stake.

Robinson, in his treatment, subordinates the king to the man; but, like all the Robinsonian characters, he is distinctly modern. This Arthur is an introspective, highly wrought man, emotionally disturbed by vague fears and suspicions. Instead of showing the traditional blindness to the love affair of Lancelot and Guinevere, he is acutely aware

of it. Through long, sleepless nights, he tortures himself with the knowledge. He has simply refused to acknowledge the truth to himself. At last, he faces the facts and admits to himself:

> 'The love that never was.' Two years ago
> He told me that: 'The love that never was!'
> I saw--but I saw nothing. Like the bird
> That hides his head, I made myself see
> nothing.
> But yesterday I saw--and I saw fire.[18]

This is Arthur at his most tragic moment. His love had come to mean more to him than his kingdom, and now its tragic culmination means more to him than the loss of his kingdom. He grieves, it is true, over the fall of the Round Table; but his deepest sorrow comes from his loss of faith in the Queen. To himself Arthur says:

> And I, who loved the world as Merlin did
> May lose it as he lost it, for a love
> That was not peace, and therefore
> was not love.[19]

In Robinson's Guinevere we have another modern, complex character, facing a modern problem. In the old mediaeval stories, the courtly love affairs between the ladies and their knights were quite the fashion. For a long time, this story of the love of Guinevere and Lancelot bore the stamp of its artificial origin; but through its many retellings it has become one of the best known love stories of all time.

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[18] Ibid., p. 391.

[19] Ibid., p. 401.

Robinson has made the story a twentieth-century love triangle. Less spiritually complex than either Lancelot or Arthur, Guinevere has more intensity and strength. Her love for Lancelot is her dominating passion. She is jealous even of the Light which seems to come between her and Lancelot. When he would leave her to follow it, she uses all her wiles to hold him back. Guinevere acknowledges that she has wronged Arthur, but in extenuation she says:

> I wronged him, but he bought me with a name
> Too large for my king-father to relinquish.[20]

Like many another, Guinevere pleads the greatness of her love as an excuse for her unfaithfulness:

> "If I were God," she said,
> "I should say, 'Let them be as they have been.
> A few more years will heap no vast account
> Against eternity, and all their love
> Was what I gave them."[21]

In the end she says:

> God pity men
> When women love too much—and
> women more.[22]

In contrast to Guinevere's singleness of purpose, Lancelot is a person of divided loyalties. He is allured by the Light; he is held by the white and gold loveliness of Guinevere. His love for her has been touched by disillusionment; his heart is filled with remorse for his

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[20] Ibid., p. 424.

[21] Ibid., pp. 419-420.

[22] Ibid., p. 441.

"cankered loyalty" to the King; and yet he is not strong enough to break away. He scorns his weakness even as he wavers between his desire to follow the Light and his temptation to remain near the Queen. Bitterly he exclaims:

> God what a rain of ashes falls on him
> Who sees the new and cannot leave the old![23]

"Merlin" and "Lancelot" are so much alike in treatment that they have been considered together. "Tristram," the other Arthurian poem, is so different from the first two, that it will be studied separately in the next chapter.

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[23] Ibid., p. 385.

CHAPTER VIII

ROBINSON'S TREATMENT OF THE TRISTRAM STORY

The story of "Tristram," although it began independently of the Arthurian cycle, was recounted in prose and verse throughout mediaeval times as if it were a portion of King Arthur's legend; eventually we find Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur containing it and so rendering it definitely a part of the Arthurian material. And now Robinson, following Malory in so far as Malory associated Tristram with Camelot, retells the story to make his history of Arthur's generation more complete. The connection of Robinson's Tristram with Camelot is not very close, but it is there. The time is earlier than that of "Merlin" and "Lancelot," and the story is, for the most part, free from the abstract themes which are found in those poems.

"Tristram" offers, both in method of treatment and in spirit, a striking contrast to "Merlin" and "Lancelot." It is the simplest and most direct of Robinson's long narrative poems. Its theme is the love of a man and a woman. We have tragedy once more, but it is the simple tragedy of separated lovers, whose fate depends not so much on their own weaknesses as on outer circumstances. There is nothing

of metaphysics in this poem; there is no Light, there is no excessive vision bringing its own punishment.[1]

The story of Tristram and Isolt which Robinson has taken out of literature and legend is one of the most famous love stories of the world. It grew up among the people of mediaeval Britain, who gave it to Europe as soon as it had a transmissible form. French poets seem to have been the first to treat it with fulness and beauty, though the "Tristan und Isolde" of Gottfried von Strassburg, a thirteenth-century German poet, is one of the finest existing versions. In Germany, and later throughout the world, Wagner, using Gottfried von Strassburg's poem for his source, gave the story currency through his opera, "Tristan und Isolde."[2]

The poets who have treated the Tristram story have made so free with it, elaborating here and inventing there, that it cannot be said to have any fixed form. Robinson has taken his own liberties with it. And since he does not explain those sections of the Legend with which he does not deal at length, it seems desirable to summarize the legend in something like its entirety.

Tristram is the son of a sister of King Mark of Cornwall. His mother dies at his birth, and from this circumstance he

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[1] Van Doren, op. cit., p. 77.

[2] Ibid., pp. 78-79.

derives his dolorous name. Since his mother had been out of favor with King Mark, Tristram is brought up away from the court; and so well is he instructed that he becomes the most famous of all living harpers, fighters, hunters, and chess-players. Upon his restoration to the court of Mark, Tristram grows in favor and fame until he is intrusted with the great mission of freeing Cornwall from an Irish tyrant, Gormond. Tristram in battle slays the Irish champion Morhaus, brother to Isolt, Gormond's Queen; but receives a wound which can be cured only by his going to Ireland to be tended by Isolt and a fair daughter of the same name. He goes to Ireland and is healed; but he returns bringing the news of the Princess Isolt's great beauty, and so is ordered to return and obtain her as Mark's Queen. He does so and starts home with her across the Irish Sea. But Isolt's mother has prepared a love-potion intended for Mark and his bride. Inadvertently this is drunk by Tristram and Isolt on the vessel that is carrying them to Tintagel. The result is a fatal love between them which will last while they live. In Cornwall, although Isolt becomes Mark's queen, she loves only Tristram. King Mark at last becomes convinced of his nephew's treachery and banishes him from the country. Tristram goes to Brittany, where, after a war to free King Howel from an old enemy, he receives for his reward the daughter of Howel, whose name is also Isolt. She is called Isolt of the White Hands. He weds the new Isolt, even though his love remains

with Isolt of Ireland. At last, wounded in still another war, he sends for his first love, asking that she fly a white sail. A black sail will mean that Tristram's messenger is returning alone. Being too ill to rise and look for the vessel himself, he begs his wife to tell him the color of the sail. Isolt of the White Hands, through jealousy or through error, announces the black sign; and Tristram sinks to his death just before Isolt of Ireland rushes in. Finding her lover's corpse, she falls dead upon it. The two bodies are taken to Cornwall, where Mark buries them in a chapel, one along each wall. A sapling springs from the tomb of Tristram and sends a shoot down into the tomb of Isolt across the way.[3] This is the composite plot of the story which never existed in any one poem.

Robinson, of course, does not tell all the story. He cuts away the earlier portions of his hero's life and simplifies the matter of Tristram's meeting with Isolt. He makes no mention of any love potion, being convinced that love by its very nature is more potent than any "love juice."

Robinson's story of "Tristram" begins with Isolt of the White Hands looking out of her father's house in Brittany for a ship that may be bringing the Tristram she once saw as a child, years ago when he gave her an agate and promised lightly that he would some day come back to greet her. Her father's half-jesting remarks concerning the un-

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[3] Ibid., pp. 80-83.

certainty of all such things do not affect her childlike faith in Tristram.

> "He will come back," she said,
> And I shall wait. If he should not come back,
> I shall have been but one poor woman more
> Whose punishment for being born a woman
> Was to believe and wait.[4]

Tristram does return to Brittany and to Isolt of the White Hands after his banishment from Cornwall. In his loneliness and trouble, he remembers Brittany and the promise made so long ago. To Gouvernail he says:

> If anywhere there were peace
> For me, it might be there—or for some time
> Till I'm awake and am a man again.[5]

Isolt of Brittany welcomes Tristram's coming as the fulfillment of a long-cherished dream. She tells him:

> "When I told my father first
> That you would come, he only smiled at me,"
> She said. "But I believe by saying always
> That you were coming, he believed you would,
> Just as I knew you would."[6]

Tristram miserably wonders:

> Why were two names like that
> Written for me by fate upon my heart
> In red and white?[7]

The ending of the story is also greatly changed. In Robinson's story, King Arthur sends for Tristram in Brittany to make him a knight of the Round Table. Tristram bids

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[4] "Tristram," Collected Poems, pp. 599-600.

[5] Ibid., p. 643.

[6] Ibid., p. 649.

[7] Ibid., p. 650.

farewell to Isolt of the White Hands, telling her that he will return. With Tristram in Camelot, Guinevere and Lancelot connive to bring about a meeting between Tristram and Isolt of Ireland. Then into the lovers' Eden, Mark comes, and carries Isolt off to Cornwall. But in Cornwall, Mark cannot bear the sight of Isolt's white, tragic face. The taste of his revenge palls. The sight of her

> Had given to death a smallness, and to life
> Ready for death, an uncomplaining triumph
> Like nothing of his.[8]

Mark tells Isolt:

> Your gates and doors are open. All I ask
> Is that I shall not see him.[9]

Tristram goes to her in Cornwall; but both the lovers feel that this, for them, is the end. Isolt is resigned to death. She tells Tristram:

> My cup was running over; and having had all
> That one life holds of joy, and in one summer,
> Why should I be a miser crying to God
> For more?[10]

In the end, it is not Mark who wreaks vengeance upon the lovers, but Andred, Mark's half-insane kinsman. Like "the black shadow of fate," Andred crept upon them:

> And leapt upon him with a shining knife
> That ceased to shine.[11]

With one last cry to God, Isolt falls upon her lover's corpse and dies. Tristram gasps her name--"Isolt!"

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[8] Ibid., p. 706.

[9] Ibid., p. 707.

[10] Ibid., p. 712.

[11] Ibid., p. 718.

She heard no more.
There was no more for either of them to hear,
Or tell. It was all done. So there they lay,
And her white arms around his head still held him,
Closer than life.[12]

In his characterization of Tristram and Isolt, Robinson has not departed so widely from the traditional conception of their characters as he did in the cases of Merlin, Arthur, and Guinevere. They are still the eternal lovers of the old mediaeval tales, even though their speech has a modern ring. Robinson's Isolt is a proud Irish beauty with violet eyes and "blue-black Irish hair." She has a great capacity for love, and a willingness to sacrifice herself for her love. She reminds Tristram:

Only remember
That all there was of me was always yours.
There was no more of me. Was it enough?[13]

This Isolt is not quite the fiery, jealous Irish Queen of Tennyson's story. This Isolt is unselfish enough to tell Tristram to go back to the other Isolt in Brittany when she, his first love, is dead.

Isolt of Ireland has greater strength of character than has Tristram. In her love there is much of the maternal spirit. Her great love gives her wisdom and strength to

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[12] Ibid., p. 718.

[13] Ibid., p. 716.

comfort him in his despair. Her arms hold him "as they would hold a child."

> Lying with eyes closed
> And all her senses tired with pain and love,
> And pity for love that was to die, she saw
> him
> More as a thunder-stricken tower of life
> Brought down by fire, than as a stricken
> man
> Brought down by fate.[14]

Robinson's Isolt wins our admiration and sympathy as Tennyson's Irish Queen never did. She makes us feel that love excuses all her human frailties.

The Tristram of Robinson's poem is still the famous harper, hunter, warrior of the old legends. He is powerless under the spell of his love for the Irish Isolt. He tells her that his love is the best of him, and that he would gladly die for her; and we feel his sincerity. When they are together, the world is forgotten:

> It was not time,
> For you or me, when we were there together.[15]

Robinson's Tristram is not the bold, half-scornful knight of Tennyson's poem. There is a new depth and tenderness in his character. He has a sort of pitying love for Isolt of Brittany who holds him with her "innocence beyond all wisdom." But the lode-star of Tristram's life is always

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[14] Ibid., p. 717.

[15] Ibid.

that other Isolt of the North. Sitting alone and looking out across a waste of waters,

> Tristram was seeing only
> A last look in two dark and frightened eyes
> That always in the moonlight would be shining,
> Alone above the sound of Cornish waves
> That always in the moonlight would be breaking,
> Cold upon Cornish rocks.[16]

Tristram may see and feel the beauty of his wife's character, but his love for Isolt of Ireland is beyond reason, and it draws him back to her in the end.

In the character of Mark, good and evil mingle. He is neither the noble king of the older versions nor the contemptible creature whom Malory and Tennyson depict. He wins Isolt for his queen, but he cannot win her love. She sees in him "a nature not so base as it was common," a nature which cannot bear thwarting. At last he recognizes the strength of Isolt's love for Tristram and bows to the inevitable. The death of the lovers comes not through him, but through Andred. Mark, too, seems a victim of circumstances.

Isolt of the White Hands is drawn with a new tenderness. So great is her love for Tristram that she asks nothing in return:

> I am not one who must have everything.
> I was not fated to have everything.

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[16] Ibid., p. 652.

One may be wise enough, not having all,
Still to be found among the fortunate.[17]

She is a pathetic figure, living with her dreams, searching the horizon for a ship which never returns. Sadly she acknowledges to herself:

I would have been the world
And heaven to Tristram, and was nothing to him.[18]

These poems of Robinson's are a twentieth-century rendering of the age-old stories of love and chivalry. In reading them, we forget their ancient origin, for the characters are modern men and women speaking our own language. They are persons who are faced with the complex problems of our own time. All of Robinson's characters "proclaim the poet's abiding sympathy for those who, unable to control experience, are swept by it into defeat. It is not quite defeat if there still remain courage and the will to live fully; that is what many feel to be Robinson's intuition of 'success in failure.'"[19]

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., p. 727.

[19] Morris, op. cit., p. 28.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

In order to understand and evaluate the works of modern writers who have used the ancient Arthurian material as their subject matter, it has been necessary to study the sources upon which these writers have drawn.

The Arthurian legends, we have found, had their origin in the dim ages of the past before history was written. Whether or not there was ever an actual King Arthur remains a debatable question. Stories concerning the heroic British king began with oral traditions and with the lays of ancient minstrels. These songs and stories were handed down from one generation to the next, until eventually we find them embodied in the poems of the oldest Welsh bards. As soon as the legends were in a transmissible form, the French writers seized upon them and made many translations and adaptations of them, while the British writers suffered them to fall into a long silence. Later, through the work of the poet Layamon, "Arthur made his return to his fatherland," and to his rightful place among British heroes. Nothing of importance was written in the English language after Layamon until the Sir Thomas Malory appeared upon the scene. It was Malory's task to weld into some approach to unity the whole Arthurian

cycle. Malory's work is important because many of the modern writers have taken his work as their source.

Tennyson, the Victorian poet, based his work principally upon Malory's adaptation. Tennyson, we learned, used the Arthurian material as the basis for his allegorical study of life. He felt that the people of his time were in need of a moral lesson, and he believed the spiritual theme which he used to be the best method of teaching this lesson. In Tennyson's Idylls, the old mediaeval knights and ladies become Victorian men and women with the ideals and conventions of the nineteenth century. In the process of transformation from mediaeval characters to symbolic figures, Tennyson's men and women lose much of their personal qualities.

Matthew Arnold, in selecting the Arthurian material as the subject-matter of a poem, demonstrated his theory that the poet should choose for his subjects great actions. Arnold considered all poetry as a "criticism of life," and his Arthurian poem cannot be thought of as teaching a moral lesson such as Tennyson attempted. Arnold, also, modernized his characters and made them into nineteenth-century men and women with a mediaeval background of ancestral castles and feudal times. Arnold's treatment is only half-way mediaevalism, because his characters speak and act like modern people.

Edwin Arlington Robinson, like Tennyson and Arnold, has modernized his Arthurian characters, but he has used a

different method from that of the other two poets. It is in Robinson's psychological analysis of character and in his study of the effect of experience on character that the difference has come. Robinson's Arthurian characters are twentieth-century personalities with modern standards and modern complexities of thought.

Each new age has given us a re-evaluation of the same material. Each writer who has treated the ancient themes of love and war in King Arthur's court has individualized them according to his own point of view, making them express the ideals of his own time. Many writers, as we have seen, have treated the ancient legends; and many, perhaps, will in future ages find in them the material from which poetry is made.

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