

**MORTE ARTHURE. EDITED FROM  
ROBERT THORNTON'S MS.  
(AB. 1440 A.D.) IN THE LIBRARY  
OF LINCOLN CATHEDRAL**

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Morte Arthure. Edited from Robert Thornton's MS. (AB. 1440 a.D.) in the Library of Lincoln Cathedral by George G. Perry

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**GEORGE G. PERRY**

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# Morte Arthure.

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ROBERT THORNTON'S MS. (AB. 1440 A.D.)

IN THE LIBRARY OF LINCOLN CATHEDRAL,

BY

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## PREFACE.

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It is confessedly almost impossible to fix on the exact point of time when the Semi-Saxon dialect, which had replaced the more formal Anglo-Saxon after the Norman Conquest, passed into the *Early English*. Those characteristic changes which constitute the *modernization* of a language were proceeding gradually. Inflections were being lost, distinctive marks of gender and case neglected, variations of meaning coming to be expressed rather by combinations of words than by changes in the words themselves, and the result was that about the middle of the thirteenth century England was speaking a language differing by a wide interval from that of the country three centuries before. This *Early English* stage of the language may be considered to extend from about the beginning of the reign of Henry III. to the end of that of Edward III., when it was succeeded by the *Middle English*.<sup>1</sup> During the whole of this period continual modification of the English tongue was going on. The language of the proclamation to the people of Huntingdonshire differs greatly from the language of Chaucer, and even from

<sup>1</sup> See Dr. Latham on "The English Language," chap. iii.; and "Hallam's Introduction to Literature of Europe," chap. i.

that of *Piers Plowman* and of the poem which is here put forth. It is probable that the *Morte Arthure* is somewhat later in date than *Piers Plowman*, but that it still falls within the period marked out for the limits of *Early English*. In comparing together the writings of this date we are at once struck by a distinction which seems to separate them into two classes. In Chaucer we see the tendency towards foreign words and idioms, and the adoption of the rhyming metre invented during the decay of the Latin tongue; in *Piers Plowman* and the *Morte Arthure* we trace the prevalence of the Saxon words and rhythm, the alliterative<sup>1</sup> or accented metre being preferred to the final cadence.

In the judgment of Warton the latter style was an evident and palpable barbarism. This critic severely censures the author of *Piers Plowman*, and, but that he was unacquainted with the *Morte Arthure*, would doubtless have included its author also in his condemnation—"Instead of availing himself of the rising and rapid improvements of the English language Longland prefers and adopts the style of the Anglo-Saxon poets. Nor did he make these writers the models of his language only: he likewise imitates their alliterative versification, which consisted in using an aggregate of words beginning with the same letter. But this imposed constraint of seeking identical initials and the affectation of obsolete English, by demanding a constant and necessary departure from the natural and obvious forms of expression, contributed also to render his manner extremely perplexed, and to disgust the readers with obscurities."<sup>2</sup> It is hoped that the readers of the following poem will not be so

<sup>1</sup> "Alliteration is the general character of all the early Gothic metres."—*Latham*.

<sup>2</sup> Warton's *History of English Poetry*, i. 266.

readily disgusted; those very obscurities which were so distasteful to the polite critic constituting some of the chief recommendation of the composition. It is hoped also that the poem will be welcomed not only on philological and grammatical grounds, but on the ground also of its own intrinsic merit—for the fire, vigour, and liveliness of its style, and the vast profusion of descriptive epithets which it pours out before the reader.

This version of the *Morte Arthure* is printed from a manuscript in the Library of Lincoln Cathedral, commonly known as the "Thornton Romances." It is a thick volume containing several poems of the Arthur type, as well as many pieces in prose, both English and Latin. The greater part of this volume was written by Robert Thornton, a native of Oswaldkirk, in Yorkshire, and Archdeacon of Bedford in the Diocese of Lincoln, about the middle of the fifteenth century. The date of Archdeacon Thornton and his connection with Lincoln Cathedral can be ascertained pretty accurately, as among the archives of the Cathedral there is preserved an instrument or deed of considerable importance, attested by him as Archdeacon, which bears date 1439.<sup>1</sup>

So valuable is this collection of ancient pieces which has been preserved by the labour of the Archdeacon, that doubtless all lovers of antiquity will be willing to concur in the wish with which the *Morte Arthure* concludes, "*Thornton dictus sit benedictus.*" The poem with which we are now concerned was first published from the Lincoln manuscript by Mr. Halli-

<sup>1</sup> This instrument is known by the name of the "*Laudum of Alnwick*," and to this day every Prebendary of the Church takes oath on his admission to observe it. It is a *decree* (*id quod laudatum est*, approved or determined) of Bishop Alnwick, in reference to certain matters in dispute between the Dean and the Canons.



well in the year 1847. The form which was then adopted was that of an expensive quarto, and the value of the book was sought to be further enhanced by a rigid limitation of the issue to seventy-five copies. These have all, probably, long ago found their way into the great libraries of the country, and the poem has become as inaccessible to the general reader as though it had never been printed. Under these circumstances the Committee of the Early English Text Society have judged it desirable that a re-publication of the poem should be made. The present edition differs from that of Mr. Halliwell in the printing of two of his lines in one, in the marking by italic letters all expansions of the manuscript contractions, and the addition of side-notes and a glossary. In the first of these points the arrangement of the manuscript is followed, the lines being always written there as here printed. A comparison of the two methods will also, it is thought, result in a decided preference, as regards rhythm, of the method here used. With respect to the expansions of the contractions, it will be observed that there is no regularity in the spelling used, a final *e* being sometimes appended to words, sometimes not. Great care has, in fact, been taken to reproduce exactly the *irregularity* which is one of the most marked features of the spelling of this manuscript. In no case has a final *e* been added unless indicated by a strong and decided mark; while the threefold variation in the writing of words beginning with *th* has been carefully followed.<sup>1</sup> The form of

<sup>1</sup> *The, This, That, Thus, Thou, Thi, These, etc.*, are sometimes written in this manuscript as at present spelled, sometimes with the Y and the final letter put over it, sometimes with the Y and the other letters following in a line; e.g. *That, Y<sup>h</sup>, Yat, This, Y<sup>e</sup>, Yis*. In the second of these cases the letters are printed in italic; in the third in roman type.

the thorn letter (*þ*) has been adopted in the printing, instead of the form used in the manuscript (*Y*), as it has been thought more agreeable to the date of the composition, and more in unison with the other publications of the same period printed by the E.E.T.S. There can be no doubt that the two forms represent substantially the same sound. The text having undergone several careful collations with the manuscript, it is hoped that it is as near perfect as may be. In some few points it will be found to differ from the very accurate edition of Mr. Halliwell.

As to the poem itself, it is held by Sir F. Madden that this is the "Gret gest of Arthure" composed by Huchowne, a Scotch ballad writer of the fourteenth century. This opinion is combated by Mr. Morris in his Preface to "Alliterative Poems," who proves that the poem was not originally written in the Scotch dialect, but in one of the Northumbrian dialects spoken South of the Tweed. Mr. Morris is also of opinion that the text of the poem had been considerably altered by a Midland transcriber before it fell into the hands of Robert Thornton. Thornton, as a Northumbrian, would probably have preferred the original reading, but finding the manuscript with its Southern modifications, he transcribed it as it stood, without attempt at restoration. In spite, however, of his having yielded to the changes of Southern transcribers, it is certain that we owe to Robert Thornton, of Oswaldkirk, a great debt of gratitude for having made a copy of the poem which has survived to our day. It is a grand specimen of Early English poetry, exhibiting some fine traits common to the early poetry of many nations, and certain special peculiarities of its own which are well worth careful study.

In almost all early poetry may be noted a simplicity of language united with what may be termed a recklessness of assertion and a contempt of the conditions required for constituting the probable. Effect is sought to be produced not by the subtle analysis of thought and feeling, nor by the description of scenery and natural objects, but by the crowding together of startling incidents, and the ascription of marvellous powers and prowess to the favoured hero. Early poetry is, as it were, the expression of inexperience, of thoughtlessness and light-heartedness, not bearing the marks of a complicated state of society, where the restless struggle for social superiority absorbs the energies and gives a grave cast to the reflections. Now this gay and light-hearted character seems to be eminently characteristic of the *Morte Arthure*. The ease with which "fifty thousand of folke are felled at ones" when they stand in the way of the victory of the knights; the jovial vein in which Arthur cleaves asunder the giant Colapas, bidding him come down and "karpe to his feris," for that "he is too high by half" to do so comfortably in his giant form; the character of Sir Gawaine, "the gude man of arms," who is so eminent a favourite with the poet because he was "the gladdest of othire,"

"And the hendeste in haulc undire hevenc riche,"

all testify to this.

And united with this light-hearted vein the least glimpse at the poem will reveal the noble contempt for the probable which it exhibits. Illustration of this is unnecessary, as the whole poem illustrates it. The author might indeed plead that he was not responsible for the "facts;" that he took them from good authority, even from the grave historian, Geoffrey of Monmouth, who has duly chronicled, in choice mediæval Latin,