

**EARLY ENGLISH ALLITERATIVE
POEMS IN THE WEST-MIDLAND
DIALECT OF THE FOURTEENTH
CENTURY. WITH AN INTRODUCTION,
NOTES, AND GLOSSARIAL INDEX**

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Early English Alliterative Poems in the West-Midland Dialect of the Fourteenth Century. With an Introduction, Notes, and Glossarial Index by Richard Morris

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RICHARD MORRIS

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122

Early English
Alliterative
Poems.

Early English
Alliterative Poems,
in the
West-Midland Dialect
of the
Fourteenth Century.

COPIED AND EDITED FROM A UNIQUE MANUSCRIPT IN THE LIBRARY OF THE
BRITISH MUSEUM, COTTON, NERO A. 2.

WITH AN

INTRODUCTION, NOTES, AND GLOSSARIAL INDEX.

BY

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PREFACE.

THE following poems are taken from a well known manuscript in the Cottonian collection, marked Nero A x, which also contains, in the same handwriting and dialect, a metrical romance,¹ wherein the adventures of Sir Gawayne with the "Knight in Green," are most ably and interestingly described.

Unfortunately nothing can be affirmed with any certainty concerning the authorship of these most valuable and interesting compositions. The editor of "Syr Gawayn and the Green Knight" considers that Huchowne, a supposed² Scotch *maker* of the fourteenth century, has the best claims to be recognised as the author, inasmuch as he is specially referred to by Wynthown as the writer of the *Gret gest of Arthure* and the *Awntyre of Gawayne*.

I do not think that any certain conclusions are to be drawn from the Scotch historian's assertion. It is well known that more versifiers than one during the fourteenth century attempted romance composition in the English language, having for their theme the knightly deeds of Arthur or Sir Gawayne. These they compiled from French originals, from which they selected the most striking incidents and those best suited to an Englishman's taste for the marvellous. We are not sur-

¹ Edited by Sir Frederic Madden for the Bannatyne Club, under the title of "Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyjt," and by me for the Early English Text Soc., 1865.

² Wynthown nowhere asserts that Huchowne is a Scotchman.

prised, then, at finding so many romance poems treating of the exploits of the same hero, and laying claim to be considered as original productions. In Scotland, Huchowne's works might no doubt have been regarded as the standard romances of the period, but that they were the only English *gests* is indeed very doubtful.

The Early English alliterative romance, entitled the *Morte Arthure*, published from a manuscript in Lincoln Cathedral by Mr. Halliwell,¹ is considered by Sir F. Madden to be the veritable *gest of Arthure* composed by Huchowne. An examination of this romance does not lead me to the same conclusion, unless Huchowne was a Midland man, for the poem is not written in the old Scotch dialect,² but seems to have been originally composed in one of the Northumbrian dialects spoken *South* of the Tweed.³

The manuscript from which Mr. Halliwell has taken his text is not the original copy, nor even a literal transcript of it. It exhibits certain orthographical and grammatical peculiarities unknown to the Northumbrian dialect which have been introduced by a Midland transcriber, who has here and there taken

¹ Edited for E. E. T. Soc. by Rev. G. G. Perry, M.A.

² This is evident from the following particulars:—

I. In old Scotch manuscripts we find the guttural *gh* (or *g*) represented by *ch*; thus, *aght*, *laght*, *saght*, *wight*, are the English forms which, in the Scotch orthography, become *awcht* (owed), *lawcht* (seized), *awucht* (peace), *wicht* (active). It is the former orthography, however, that prevails in the *Morte Arthure*.

II. We miss the Scotch use of (1) *-is* or *-ys*, for *-es* or *-s*, in the plural number, and of possessive cases of nouns, and in the person endings of the present tense indicative mood of verbs; (2) *-it* or *-yt*, for *-ed* or *d*, in the preterites or passive participles of regular verbs.

III. There is a total absence of the well-known Scotch forms *begouth* (began), *sa* (so), *sic* (such), *throuch*, *thorow* (through). Instead of these *bigan*, *so*, *syche*, *thrughe* (*thurghe*) are employed. See Preface to Hampole's *Pricke of Conscience*, pp. vii. viii.

³ This is shown by the frequent employment of *-es* as the person ending of the verb in the present tense, plural number. The corresponding Southern verbal inflexion *-eth*, never occurs; while the Midland *-en* is only occasionally met with in the third person plural present, and has been introduced by a later copyist. There are other characteristics, such as the predominance of words containing the A.S. long *a*; as *hams* (home), *stane* (stone), *thra* (hold), *walde* (would), etc.; the frequent use of *thir* (these), *tha* (the, those), etc.

the liberty to adapt the original text to the dialect of his own locality, probably that one of the North Midland counties, where many of the Northumbrian forms of speech would be intelligible.¹

A comparison of the Arthurian romance with the following poems throws no light whatever upon the authorship of the poems. The dialect of the two works is altogether different, although many of the terms employed are common to both, being well known over the whole of the North of England. The grammatical forms (the best test we can have) in the poems are quite distinct from those in the *Morte Arthure*, and of course go far to prove that they do not proceed from the pen of the same writer.

The Editor of "Syr Gawayn and the Green Knight" acknowledges that the poems in the present volume, as now preserved to us in the manuscript, are not in the Scottish dialect, but he says "there is sufficient internal evidence of their being *Northern*,² although the manuscript containing them appears to have been written by a scribe of the Midland counties, which will account for the introduction of forms differing from those used by writers beyond the Tweed."

Now, with regard to this subsequent transcription of the poems from the Scotch into a Midland dialect,—it cannot be

¹ The peculiarities referred to do not appear to be owing to the copyist of the Lincoln manuscript (Robert de Thornton, a native of Oswaldkirk in Yorkshire), who, being a Northumbrian, would probably have restored the original readings. The non-Northumbrian forms in the *Morte Arthure* are—1. The change of *a* into *o*, as *bolde* for *balde*, *bate* for *bate*, *one* for *ane*, *houde* for *hande*, *tonde* for *tonde*; 2. *they*, *theyre*, *them*, *theym*, for *thay*, *thaire*, *tham*; 3. *gayliche*, *kindliche*, *seemlyche*, etc., for *gayly*, *kindly*, *seemly*, etc. (the termination *lich*, *liche*, was wholly unknown to the Northumbrian dialect, being represented by *ly* or *like*); 4. *churle*, *churche*, *iche*, *mashe*, *myche*, *syche*, *wyrche*, etc., for *carle*, *kirke*, *ilk*, *make*, *mykelle*, *swilk*, *wyrk*, etc.; 5. infinitives in *-en*, as *drenchen*, *schewenne*, *scacchenna*, etc.; 6. the use of *eke*, *thas*, for *als* (*alawa*), *thas*; 7. the employment of *aye* for *egg*. The former word never occurs in any pure Northumbrian work, while the latter is seldom met with in any Southern production.

² The poems are *Northern* in contradistinction to *Southern*, but they are not Northern or Northumbrian in contradistinction to *Midland*.

said to be improbable, for we have abundant instances of the multiplication of copies by scribes of different localities, so that we are not surprised at finding the works of some of our popular Early English writers appearing in two or three forms; but, on the other hand, a comparison of the original copy with the *adapted transcriptions*, or even the reading of a transcribed copy, always shows how the author's productions have suffered by the change. Poetical works, especially those with final rhymes, of course undergo the greatest amount of transformation and depreciation. The changes incident upon the kind of transcription referred to are truly surprising, and most perplexing to those who make the subject of Early English *dialects* a matter of investigation.

But, in the present poems, the uniformity and consistency of the grammatical forms is so entire, that there is indeed no internal evidence of subsequent transcription into any other dialect than that in which they were originally written. However, the dialect and grammatical peculiarities will be considered hereafter.

Again, in the course of transcription into another dialect, any literary merit that the author's copy may have originally possessed would certainly be destroyed. But the poems before us are evidently the work of a man of birth and education; the productions of a true poet, and of one who had acquired a perfect mastery over that form of the English tongue spoken in his own immediate locality during the earlier part of the fourteenth century. Leaving out of consideration their great philological worth, they possess an intrinsic value of their own as literary compositions, very different from anything to be found in the works of Robert of Gloucester, Manning, and many other Early English authors, which are very important as philological records, but in the light of poetical productions cannot be said to hold a very distinguished place in English literature. The poems in the present volume contain many

passages which, as Sir F. Madden truly remarks, will bear comparison with any similar ones in the works of Douglas or Spenser.

I conclude, therefore, that these poems were not transcribed from the Scotch dialect into any other, but were written in their own West-Midland speech in which we now have them.

Mr. Donaldson, who is now editing for the Early English Text Society the *Troy Book*, translated from Guido di Colonna, puts forward a plea for Huchowne as its author, to whom he would also assign the *Morte Arthure* (ed. Perry) and the *Pistel of Sweet Susan*.¹ But Mr. Donaldson seems to have been misled by the similarity of vocabulary, which is not at all a safe criterion in judging of works written in a Northumbrian, West or East Midland speech. The dialect, I venture to think, is a far safer test. A careful examination of the *Troy Book* compels me to differ in toto from Mr. Donaldson, and, instead of assigning the *Troy Book* to a Scotchman, say that it cannot even be claimed, in its present form, by any Northumbrian south of the Tweed; moreover, it presents no appearance of having been tampered with by one unacquainted with the dialect, though it has perhaps been slightly modernised in the course of transcription.

The work is evidently a genuine West-Midland production,² having most of the peculiarities of vocabulary and inflexions that are found in these *Alliterative Poems*.³ I feel greatly inclined to claim this English *Troy Book* as the production of the author of the *Alliterative Poems*; for, leaving out identical and by no means common expressions, we find the same power of

¹ Printed by Mr. D. Laing in his "Inedited Pieces," from a MS. of Mr. Heber's. Other copies are in the Vernon MS., and Cotton Calig. A. ii.; the latter imperfect.

² Other specimens of this dialect will doubtless turn up. Mr. Brock has found a MS. in British Museum (Harl. 3909) with most of the peculiarities pointed out by me in the preface to the present work, and I believe that this dialect was probably a flourishing one in the 13th century. See O.E. Homilies, p. li.

³ (1) *es* as the inflexion of the pres. tense pl., indic. mood of verbs; (2) *s* in the second and third pers. sing. of verbs; (3) *he* = she; (4) *hit* = its; (5) *two* = two; (6) *dester* = daughters, etc.