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MIDDLE ENGLISH

[By MARGARET L. LEE]

GENERALIZATIONS concerning the life and literature of the Middle English period (which for purposes of this section will be considered as dating from 1100 to 1500) are still rendered difficult by paucity of material, or rather by the inaccessibility of material known to exist.

It is natural therefore to find the output of any given year dividing itself roughly into two classes: the larger or textual class, consisting of editions of Middle English works hitherto little known save to scholars, with a volume or two of selections for students; the smaller, of works dealing synthetically with some special aspect of life, thought, or language during the four centuries now under consideration.

In the first class a high place must be given to Professor Gollancz's edition of the *Debate between Winner and Waster*¹ (1852), a poem printed from a unique and very corrupt MS., and forming an interesting contribution to that body of fourteenth-century poetry which illustrates the revival of the alliterative metre in the West Midland district. The *Debate* is cast in the traditional form of a dream, and its opening is reminiscent of that of *Piers Plowman*, with which also it challenges comparison on account of its historical, political, and social allusions, many of them both interesting and valuable. In his Preface, Professor Gollancz points out this resemblance, and also the similarity between the state of England as described in these poems and that which prevails in our own time. Conditions of

¹ *A Good Short Debate between Winner and Waster*, edited by Sir Israel Gollancz, Litt.D., F.B.A., Professor of English Language and Literature, King's College, London. London, 1920 (No. III of *Select Early English Poems*). Humphrey Milford. Size, 7 × 9 in. 5s. net.

labour, luxurious living, profiteering, the nation's foreign policy, and the prevailing religious corruption all come in for a share of the fourteenth-century writer's attention, and, in most cases, of his disparagement. But, as the editor remarks, 'it is difficult to epitomize adequately, where every line is of interest by reason of argument, allusion, or vivid description'.

Professor Gollancz believes that *Winner and Waster* inspired the greater work of Langland, the 'prophet-poet of England'. Many traces of this influence, as well as verbal parallels between the texts, are mentioned in the very full explanatory and illustrative notes. It is unfortunate that this valuable poem should be, in the existing MS., unfinished, though probably a short concluding passage only is wanting.

If *Winner and Waster* represents the view-point of the mal-content and social reformer, the *Worcester Liber Albus*² gives us a picture of the orderly life of a great monastic foundation, in such terms as to arouse some of the sentiment of regret which inspired Carlyle's *Past and Present*. From this book, now in Worcester Cathedral Library, Canon Wilson has selected letters bearing date 1301 to 1388. Others from the same collection have been printed in the *Transactions* of the Worcestershire Historical Society for 1919. Canon Wilson's method of treatment is frankly popular and uncritical, the aim of the published letters being to throw light upon various events and topics of the fourteenth century, which are of special interest to our own, such as Tithe for the Holy Land, The Convent's Property in Ireland, The Prior's Duties, Manumission of a Serf, and Death of Edward I.

The next volume on our list is of a different character. Here the Provost of Eton has edited an obscure Latin memoir by one John Blacman,³ dealing with the personality of that weak

² *The Worcester Liber Albus*, by the Rev. James M. Wilson, D.D., Canon and Vice-Dean. London: S.P.C.K., 1920. Size, 5½ × 8¾ in. xiii-xviii + 1-276 pp. 15s.

³ *Henry the Sixth*: a Reprint of John Blacman's Memoir, with translation and notes, by M. R. James, Litt.D., F.B.A., F.S.A., Provost of Eton. Cambridge University Press, 1919. Size, 6 × 9½ in. vii-xvi + 1-60 pp. 5s. net.

though pious monarch, Henry VI. Blacman's view is obviously biased; to him Henry is a saint, whose defects in the discharge of his royal office may pass unregarded. Dr. James says little on this point, but his reproduction of the text, with Preface, full translation, and notes, is a model of faithful editing; and no study of the reign of Henry VI will henceforth be complete without reference to the material here brought to light.

Less novel in content is the reprint by Canon Woolley of Richard Rolle's *Officium et Miracula*,⁴ another Latin text, of which, however, no translation is supplied. The interest taken of late in Richard Rolle is part of a larger movement towards the right understanding of mysticism which has also directed attention to such writers as Donne, Vaughan, Crashaw, Traherne, and Blake, and with which numbers seven and ten of the books herein considered also connect themselves. A short account of Rolle, and of the MSS. of his works, is prefixed.

Next comes another reprint, of a more popular type, consisting of a selection of those chapters from Malory's *Mort d'Arthur* which deal with the Quest of the Sangreal.⁵ Paragraphing, spelling, and punctuation have been modernized; otherwise Caxton's original text is preserved, obsolete words being explained by means of foot-notes.

All of the afore-mentioned texts are dealt with for the sake of their subject-matter rather than of their philological interest; two, indeed, being written in Latin.

The most important contribution of the year to the language study of the Middle English period is undoubtedly Dr. Joseph Hall's two volumes of *Selections from Early Middle English*⁶ (1130-1250). Extract books are many, but for the study of so

⁴ *The Officium and Miracula of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, edited by Reginald Maxwell Woolley, D.D. London: S.P.C.K., 1919. Size, 8vo. 5-84 pp. 5s.

⁵ *The Noble Tale of the Sangreal*, edited by a Graduate of Cambridge (Pilgrim's Book Series, No. 4). London: P. Alan & Co., 1920. Size, 4 x 6½ in. viii-xi + 1-209 pp. 5s. net.

⁶ *Selections from Early Middle English, 1130-1250*, edited by Joseph Hall, M.A., Hon. D.Litt., Durham. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920. 2 vols. Size, crown 8vo. Vol. i (Text), pp. 1-222 7s. 6d. Vol. ii (Notes), pp. 228-675. 15s.

bulky a mass of material as Middle English literature presents, their value is indisputable, and their place assured. This example is an excellent one, though for practical reasons exception may be taken to the voluminous character of the notes (reactionary, perhaps, against past tradition in such anthologies) and to their relegation to a separate volume. No glossary is appended, the Notes dealing exhaustively with every unfamiliar and obsolete word. Many of Dr. Hall's twenty-three specimens are necessarily drawn from familiar sources, but others, such as the Worcester Fragments and the Hymns of St. Godric, provide a welcome variety. We could heartily wish that it had been found possible to print the book with wider margins (a most desirable adjunct to a text-book for the use of students) and in a larger type.

Turning from studies of texts to synthetic criticism, we notice first a masterly piece of investigation into the authorship of the fifteenth-century poem of *Wallace*⁷ by Professor Schofield, whose recent death has been a grievous loss to English scholarship. The attribution of *Wallace* to a minstrel known as Blind Harry has till recently been accepted on the almost contemporary evidence of John Major or Mair, despite the difficulties suggested by its sophisticated style, its traces of Chaucerian and foreign influence, and the literary art shown throughout, and above all the statement that it is translated from a Latin original. But during the present century conclusions have changed to an extent recorded by Neilson when he speaks of the *Wallace* as 'a conscious heroic poem of a type elaborate, ambitious, and highly developed', while at the same time no key to the problem of Blind Harry's personality has been supplied.

Professor Schofield finds such a key in Dunbar's Interlude, *The Droichis Part of the Play*, c. 1500, where the dwarf is made to declare :

'I am the nakit Blind Hary
That lang has bene in the Fary
Farleis to fynd.'

⁷ *Mythical Bards and the Life of William Wallace*, by W. H. Schofield, Professor of Comparative Literature in Harvard University. Harvard University Press, 1920. Size, 8½ x 6 in. xii + 381 pp. 12s. 6d. net.

The blind minstrel referred to is probably a mere mask-personality, assumed in a common and recognizable mythic vein, and comparable to such similar traditional figures as those of Blind Tiresias, Ossian, and Thomas the Rymer. The stay in fairy-land is a frequent mythical motive, with which the blindness may be connected as a punishment often laid by the inhabitants of the other world on those who have penetrated their secrets. So may also the return to a state of mortal age and poverty; Blind Harry reappears among his fellows in 'utter nakedness', but with a reputation for occult knowledge. It is noteworthy that the father of Dunbar's 'droich' is Gow mac Morn, and the author identifies Blind Harry with Ossian, also a son of Gow, and ventures the suggestion that Harry, or Garry, may be mere variant names for one mythical personage.

This personage the actual writer of the *Wallace* chose as a mouthpiece for his largely fictitious account of a former champion of Scottish rights, just as Scott in later days used Thomas the Rymer as his mouthpiece in relating the Arthurian fable; while the actual beggar-bard known as Blind Harry in the fifteenth century, and mentioned by Dunbar in his *Lament for the Makars* as recently dead, may easily have assumed the traditional name in a fashion usual at the time.

The *Wallace* is then practically an anonymous work, and the writer's statement that he is a 'burel' man should probably not be taken at its face-value. Much rather does he appear to be clever, well-read, self-conscious, and versed in literary arts. His self-depreciation is of the same kind as that of the arch-impostor Geoffrey of Monmouth, and his ascription of his matter to a certain Latin writer 'Master Blair' is on a par with Chaucer's references to the mysterious Lollius. On all these points the unknown writer of the *Wallace* is probably adopting a recognized literary convention. Again, the savagely patriotic tone of the poem (vengeful, and inciting the Scots to cruelty and barbarism) suggests a reason for the assumption of a pagan authorship—that of Blind Harry, son of Gow mac Morn—as an appropriate disguise.

Such is, in briefest outline, the theory by which Professor Schofield claims to 'have got rid of a bugbear of literary

criticism', and which he supports with his usual painstaking thoroughness not unenlivened by humour.

We notice next Miss Deanesly's important contribution to the series of Cambridge Studies in mediaeval life and thought, namely, a history of *The Lollard Bible, and other Medieval Biblical Versions*.⁸ The aim of the volume, we are told, is 'to put the history of English biblical translations into its European background, and to consider English medieval translations historically, from new material'; and the series of which it forms part 'appeals directly to that craving for clearer facts which has been bred in these times of storm and stress'. These are the words of the general editor, Mr. Coulton, and they indicate well the lines upon which Miss Deanesly has worked. Her chapter headings and arrangement of material could hardly be improved. After stating the problem of the Middle English Bible, she proceeds to enlarge upon the prohibitions of vernacular Bible-reading in the various countries of Europe, and then to give an account of pre-Wycliffite Bible study and translation. Wycliffe is shown to have been responsible for the idea of a vernacular Bible, and a large amount of interesting evidence concerning the genesis of his great venture, and contemporary opinion with regard to it, is brought to light. The two versions of the Wycliffite Bible are then described, and there is a clear account of the controversies resulting from its appearance and of its effect on biblical study in general. Two Appendices full of documentary matter, much of it new, complete the volume.

Since the study of our literature reveals more and more the extent and significance of the influence of the English Bible upon its thought, imagery, structure, and language, it is impossible to overrate the importance of such knowledge as this book for the first time presents to the general reader. It shows the great Bible versions to have been at once the product and the inspiration of the fourteenth and succeeding centuries, superseding the

⁸ *The Lollard Bible, and other Medieval Biblical Versions*, by Margaret Deanesly, M.A., Fellow of Newnham College. Cambridge University Press, 1920. Size, 9 × 6 in. 483 pp. 31s. 6d. net.

Vulgate translation by virtue of their own intrinsic merit and the thoroughly native quality of their style.

By a not too violent transition we pass from a study of the English Bible to one of the Parish Gilds,⁹ institutions mainly religious in origin, and dating (where a date is ascertainable) in the great majority of cases from the fourteenth century.

After a general exposition of the nature of the Gilda, their development and subsequent decay, the author adds by way of Appendix a careful analysis of the Gild certificates of 1389, to the number of 471, giving in each case the language in which the original certificate is made out, the origin, purpose, and religious provisions of the Gild, its benefits to members, and other items of general information. Here, as in the book last mentioned, most detailed research into documentary evidence has clearly been carried out, and the result is a scholarly and withal a sympathetic treatment of a subject hitherto inadequately dealt with.

From Parish Gilds and Bible reading it may seem a far cry to the heights of transcendental mysticism reached in the marvellous Legend of the Grail. Miss Weston's object is to show that the transcendental and the practical are here, as often, closely akin. In her exceedingly interesting study of Grail origins,¹⁰ she reaches conclusions which may at once revolutionize and harmonize the views of earlier scholars.

Starting with a statement of the apparently irreconcilable theories (a) that the legend is *ab initio* Christian and ecclesiastical, (b) that it is part of a Celtic folk-lore cycle embodying late Christian elements, Miss Weston points out the difficulties which impede both, and claims that a third theory, hitherto undemonstrated, is capable of resolving these into a form of synthesis.

The study of Sir J. G. Frazer's *Golden Bough* put Miss Weston upon the track of researches into the evidence connecting

⁹ *The Parish Gilds of Medieval England*, by H. F. Westlake, M.A., F.S.A. London: S.P.C.K., 1919. Size, 6 x 9½ in. 242 pp. 15s. net.

¹⁰ *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie L. Weston. Cambridge University Press, 1920. Size, 9 x 5½ in. xv + 196 pp. 12s. 6d. net.

the Grail story with the early Nature Cults therein described. This evidence, patiently accumulated during many years, is here submitted to the reader, and is undoubtedly of a striking nature. At the heart of all the Nature Cults and ceremonies lies the idea of Life, essential, continuous, and ever-renewed—

When Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

and this sense of and need for life, the realization, moreover, of the sanctity of the life-giving faculty, has exercised an overpowering influence upon primitive forms of religion. In the light of this idea the writer investigates the outstanding features of the legend—the task of the hero, the freeing of the waters (providing remarkable links with the Tammuz and Adonis cults), the symbols of cup, lance, sword, and stone (found connected in the four suits of the Bohemian Tarot), the priestly young Knights (identifiable perhaps with the armed youths of the Sword Dance), the healer or fertilizer (probably at first a distinct character, though merged in the later legends under the personality of Sir Gawain), the fisher-king (guardian of the ancient life-symbol of the fish), and the esoteric secret of the Grail itself, attainment of spiritual union by ecstasy—the ‘Chapel Perilous’ symbolizing the gateway of initiation.

She points out that in the human or folk-lore elements lies all that is necessary for a mystic development of the tradition, following upon the lines of the Mithraic cult so largely embodied in early Christian Gnosticism, and more or less realized by such exponents as de Borron and Chrestien de Troyes. Thus the primitive Vegetation Ritual, treated from the esoteric point of view as a Life Cult, and enriched by Christian legend and traditional folk-tale, gave birth to this marvellous and bewildering legend of the Middle Ages, which, although taken under the aegis of the Church and modified by racial tendencies, has maintained throughout a curiously unorthodox and independent quality, unidentifiable with any creed or nation.

Whether or no the verdict of future scholarship corroborates Miss Weston's conclusions, it will certainly have to reckon with them seriously, and the immediate result should be a decrease in the number of those isolated monographs—‘one dealing with

the Grail as a food-providing talisman, and that alone, another with the Grail as a vehicle of spiritual sustenance; one that treats of the lance as a pagan weapon, and nothing more; another that regards it as a Christian relic, and nothing less'. It would, as Miss Weston justly complains, 'defy the skill of the most synthetic genius to co-ordinate the results thus obtained, and combine them in one harmonious whole. They are like pieces of a puzzle, each of which has been symmetrically cut and trimmed, till they lie side by side, unfitting, and unrelated.'

This want of synthesis has been the besetting defect of the great mass of Grail literature; it may be hoped that the masterly attempt here made to supply a clue to the central and unifying conception will at least mark a new era in the history of our quest for enlightenment.

The inclusion of *From Ritual to Romance* among books dealing with Middle English language and literature should perhaps have been prefaced by a reminder to readers of how large a portion of our later mediaeval writings is concerned with the Grail story and its offshoots. A different apology will explain our reference to Professor Studer's Oxford Lecture on *The Study of Anglo-Norman*.¹¹ Here the subject, although technically dissociated from English studies, is in reality inseparable from them; and Professor Studer expresses a well-justified surprise at its neglect by modern specialists in this country.

The first part of the lecture is devoted to an investigation of the accuracy of the term 'Anglo-Norman', which is defended on the ground that 'literature and education on the one hand, government and trade on the other, contributed powerfully to mould the speech of the Frenchmen who streamed into this country in the wake of the Conqueror into one homogeneous language, which, once established in England, developed independently'. The history of this development and the

¹¹ *The Study of Anglo-Norman*. Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford by Paul Studer, Taylorian Professor of Romance Languages, 6th Feb., 1920. Oxford University Press, 1920. Size, 9 x 5½ in. 28 pp., paper covers. 1s. 6d. net.

relation of Anglo-Norman to continental Norman and to Parisian French are then traced.

Finally, Professor Studer gives an interesting though necessarily a brief account of the work preserved in this language. The Normans, he tells us, were a practical yet religious people, whose literary output assumed such forms as almanacs, prophecies, charms, and recipes—the equivalents of the scientific monographs of to-day—history, mostly in rhyming chronicles, Bible translations, and moral treatises. But ‘the real value of Anglo-Norman civilization lies in the new orientation it gave to human thought’—the cosmopolitan spirit, the catholicity of taste, which it engendered. ‘The union with Normandy turned England southward, and brought it at once into the full current of European affairs.’ Professor Studer shows how the Normans opened up to English readers two great storehouses of material which they had themselves absorbed—the classical and the Celtic—and how from the influence of the latter arose, in the form known to us, both the Grail and the Arthur legends.

Seeing the immense importance of the Norman Conquest, and of the language and literature which it introduced to every student of English, we cannot but join in the Professor’s demand for the production of an Anglo-Norman grammar and dictionary, of more well-edited texts, and of extended research into the comparative philology of Middle English and Anglo-Norman.

Here our study ends. The year’s work, if not rich, has been representative of many lines of research and many varieties of interest, and tends to show that Scholarship, so long discountenanced by War, is once more coming to its own.