

Lessons in English Literature.—VIII.

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Le Morte Darthur.

When Chaucer wrote, and for nearly a hundred years after, all books had to be copied by hand. Many of these manuscripts, that is, hand-written books, are to be seen in museums and great libraries, and very beautiful some of them are; but, as you may imagine, they were rare and costly. But late in the thirteenth century the art of printing was brought to England by William Caxton, who set up a printing press at Westminster.

Caxton, who was a wise and learned man, did a great deal to increase knowledge in England. He made a wise choice of the books that he printed, sometimes translating books from other languages, sometimes printing the best books that had been written in English. Among the latter was Sir Thomas Malory's Book of King Arthur and of his noble Knights of the Round Table, called "Le Morte Darthur." This was printed at Westminster in the year 1485.

We know hardly anything about Sir Thomas Malory; indeed, we know nothing, certainly, but what he tells us of himself at the end of his book. He closes it in these words:

This book was ended the ninth year of the reign of King Edward the Fourth by Sir Thomas Malore, Knight, as Jesu help him for His great might, as he is the servant of Jesu both day and night.

He had great skill in telling stories, and he wrote beautiful English. His book is one of the very famous ones in our language, and has been printed over and over again since Caxton printed it, and read with delight by many readers in all the years since then.

Now, who was the King Arthur of whom Malory wrote? Some people have said, indeed it was said even in Caxton's time, there never was such a king, and that all the stories written about him were but fables. But scholars tell us that there certainly was a prince or leader of the Britons named Arthur, who lived in the beginning of the fifth century, and fought against the Picts and Scots who were invading Britain from the north, and the Saxons, or English, who were landing on the east coast. But anything more than this that we read about him must be taken as story, not as history. It must have been very soon after his death that songs began to be made about him and his great deeds, first among the British in Cornwall and Wales, then among the

people of Brittany, in France. There were prose stories written about him in Welsh and in Latin, and poems in Norman-French, and in the French of the south. And in all of these, Arthur is a great hero. "The old world knows not his peer," says one old writer, "nor will the future show us his equal,—he alone towers over all other kings, better than the past ones, and greater than those that are to be." And another, "In short, God has not made, since Adam was, the man more perfect than Arthur." And Caxton says, "In all places, Christian and heathen, he is reputed and taken for one of the nine worthy, and the first of the three Christian men."* It was said of him, as it has been said of other great heroes, that he was not dead, but would come again. Malory tells us that this was believed,—

Yet some men yet say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had, by the will of our Lord Jesu, in another place. And men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the holy cross. I will not say it shall be so, but rather I will say, here in this world he changed his life. But many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse:

Hic jacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, Rexque futurus.†

These stories about the hero-king went on growing and being added to, both in France and England, and stories about other heroes came to be connected with them: the story of Lancelot, of Tristan, of Merlin, the story of the Holy Grail, and many others, until they formed what is called a cycle, that is, a collection of stories, either in prose or verse, celebrating a particular person, or event. And these stories, in different forms, were known all over Western Europe in the time of Malory and Caxton. The latter says in his preface to "Le Morte Darthur":

He (Arthur) is more spoken of beyond the sea, more books made of his noble acts than there be in England, as well in Dutch, Italian, Spanish and Greekish, as in French. And many noble volumes be made of him and of his noble knights in French, which I have seen and read beyond the sea, which be not had in our maternal tongue. But in Welsh be many, and also in French, and some in English, but nowhere nigh all. Wherefore I have emprised to imprint a book of the noble histories of the said King Arthur, and of certain of his knights, after a copy unto me delivered, which copy Sir Thomas Malory did take out of certain books of French, and reduced it into English.

* The nine worthy are: Three Heathen, namely, Hector of Troy, Alexander the Great, Julius Cesar; Three Jews: Joshua, David and Judas Maccabeus; Three Christian men: Arthur, Charlemagne, and Godfrey of Boulogne.

† Here lies Arthur, King that was, King that shall be.