

SOURCE OF TENNYSON'S IDYLLS.

We have lying before us one of those stories of olden folk-lore, which would once have divided our heart with the Arabian Nights Entertainments, Baron Munchausen of veracious memory, travelled Gulliver, and life-like Defoe; but which now (O, changed times!) would be voted by us a bore. It is "The History of the Renowned King Arthur, and his Knights of the Round Table," and is doubtless the original both of Bulwer's drama of Arthur, and the Laureate's *Morte d' Arthur* and *Idylls*. It was compiled by one Sir Thomas Malory, in 1470, supposed to be a Welsh priest,* from Welsh and Breton sources, which were probably original. These legends of the Round Table, and of its chief hero, come to us like some breeze laden with perfume from unknown bowers; they are myths of as poetic a nature as any classic story; and the style in which they are told derives a sublimity from its very simplicity. So popular was this tale, that two of the earliest English printers (Caxton in 1485, and Wynkyn de Worde in 1498), employed themselves about it. Only one copy each of these original editions is extant. The conscientious Caxton had to be persuaded that Arthur was not a myth, by arguments that would seem very comical nowadays. The Prologue runs thus:—

"There be nine worthy and best that ever were, that is, to wit, three Panims, three Jews, and the three Christian men. As for the Panims, they were before the incarnation of Christ, which were named the first Hector of Troy, of whom the history is common, both in ballad and in prose; the second, Alexander the Great; and the third, Julius Cæsar, emperor of Rome, of which the histories be well known and had. And as for the three Jews, which were also before the incarnation of our Lord, of whom the first was duke Joshua, which brought the children of Israel into the land of beheast; the second was David, King of Jerusalem; and the third was Judas Maccabees. Of these three, the Bible rehearseth all their noble histories and acts. And, since the said incarnation, have been three noble Christian men, called and admitted through the universal world, into the number of the nine best and worthy; of whom was first, the noble king Arthur, whose noble acts I purpose to write in this present book here following; the second was Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, of whom the history is had in many places, both in French and in English; and the third and last, was Godfrey, of Bulloigne, of whose acts and life I made a book unto the excellent prince and king, of noble memory, Edward the Fourth. The said noble gentleman instantly required me for to imprint the history of the said noble king and conqueror, king Arthur, and his knights, with the history of the Sancgreal, and of the death and ending of the said king Arthur, affirming that I ought rather to imprint his acts and noble feats, than of Godfrey,

* The title *Sir* was sometimes given to priests in those days. *Sir* William Sau- tre, Rector of St. Oswyth's, London, was the first priest burnt for heresy, in 1491.