THE CHANGING ENGLISH LANGUAGE
Illustrated by Translations of the Bible and Boethius

CHANGING LITERARY STYLE
Illustrated by the Arthurian Legend

Readings in Old, Middle, and Modern English
Recorded by Charles W. Dunn

Both language and literary style are constantly subject to change. Any language tends gradually to alter its repertoire of sounds, its contrasting grammatical forms, its various systems of word-arrangements, its syllabic stresses and sentence intonations, the meaning of its words, and the scope of its vocabulary. English, through its long history from the time it was brought to Britain about 450 A.D., down to the present, well exemplifies this fact. Similarly, authors throughout the ages have continued to evolve new literary styles, even when treating traditional materials.

This record is designed to bring to life something of the changes represented in the rich linguistic and literary heritage of the English-speaking world. For the purpose, the spoken word is much more informative than the written word. I have selected comparable passages from Old English (ca. 450-ca. 1100), Middle English (ca. 1100-ca. 1450), and Modern English and have read them according to the pronunciation appropriate to the various periods of the language, following as far as possible the probable sound of the earlier language as it has been reconstructed by the researches of linguistic historians.

SIDE 1: THE CHANGING ENGLISH LANGUAGE

THE PRODIGAL SON (Luke XV, 11-24)

SIDE 1, Band 1: (Modern English)


He went on to say, "He was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that comes to me.'"

11 He said, forby, "A particular man had two sons; twentieth part to me o' the land, and he began to want, as he usually heard.

12 And the young son said to his father, 'Father! give me my portion that was to me o' the land.' And he partitioned out to him to leave.

13 "And," a whilen after, the young son goth a' his gear together, and gae awa frâ hâm till a far-a-ways land; and there spend't his gear in riotousness.

14 "But mair: when a was gane that came up an awesome famine out-threw you lan'; and he begot to be wantin.'

15 "And he gae awa, and was scornin o' men o' that lan'; and he sent him out-by to herd swine.

16 "And he fam'd till he's sel' wis the hools the swine was eatin'; and nae an gie him till him.

17 "But, comin' till his richt min', quoth he, 'Hoo many are the fee'd servants o' my father, who hae roun't o' bread, and an over-come; while I, here, des o' hunger!'

18 "'I'll rise and gang tae my father, and wull say till him, My father! I hae done wrang, again Heven, and afor ye; I am nae mair wordie to be ca'd yer son!'

SIDE 1, Band 3: (Early Modern English)

This is the familiar and justifiably admired Authorized or King James Version completed by a committee of translators in 1611. Because they aimed at achieving a dignified tone, their choice of language was even in their own age slightly archaic, but their sense of style has perhaps never been rivaled. (The reading does not attempt to reconstruct the actual pronunciation of the period).

11 "And he said, A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.'

12 And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

13 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

14 And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent in into his fields to feed swine.

15 And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him.

16 And when he came to himself, he said, 'How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare; and I perish with hunger!'

SIDE 1, Band 2: (Scottish Dialect)


11 He said, meth, "A particular man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living." And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent in into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, 'How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare; and I perish with hunger!'"

1. The Prodigal Son

A man hadde two sons; and þe yonger of hem sende unto his fadir: ‘Fadir, gyve me a porcion of þe substance þat falliþ me.’ And þe fadir departhe him his goodis. And somer aþer, þis yonger son gederite al þat fel to him, and wente forþ in pilgrimage in to a fer contrée; and þer he wastede his goodis, lyynge in lecherie. And after þat he hadde endid allis his goodis, þer fel a greut hungere in þat land, and he bogan to be nede. And he wente coute, and clevede to oon of þe cities in þat contrée, and þis citizen sente him into his toom, to kep þyn wyn. And þis son covetide to fille his heli wiþ poss-holes þat þe hoggis sten, and no man saþ him. And he, turnynge aþen, seide: ‘How many bynen in my fadirs houen full of loves, and y perise here for hungere. Y shal rie, and go to my fadir, and seie to him: ‘Fadir, I have synned in heven, and bifore þoe; now I am not worþ þe to be cledid þis sone, make me as oon of þin bynen.’’ And he roos, and cam to his fadir. And þat whanne he was fer, his fadir sawe him, and was moved bi mercy, and retynynge aþen his sone, fel on his nekke, and kiste him. And þis sone seide to him: ‘Fadir, y have synned in heven, and bifore þoe; now I am not worþ þe to be cledid þis sone.’ And þe fadir seide to his ser-vauunis anon: ‘Bringe je forþ je þirste stoole, and cloþ þe him, and gyve je a ryng in his hond, and shoon upon his feet. And bringe je a þat cafl, and ale him, and eto we, and fedo us; for þis son of þyn was deado, and is quykened aþen, and he was parished, and is foundan.’

CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY (III, meter 3)

SIDE I, Band 6: (Latin original)

The Consolation of Philosophy, one of the most influential books written in the Dark Ages, was composed by the Roman consul Boethius while he was in prison awaiting execution in 524 A.D. It is cast in the form of a debate between Philosophy and the prisoner. The prose argument is, throughout, lightened with brief alternating lyrics, of which the present excerpt is an example.


Quamvis fluente dives auri gurgite
Non expleturis cogat avarus opes,
Onereque bacis colla rubri litoris,
Ruraque centeno scintat optima bove,
Nec cura mordax deseret superstitem,
Defunctumque leves non comitantur opes.

SIDE I, Band 7: (Modern English)

Translation: C. W. Dunn.

Although in rushing flood of gold the rich man, avaricious, should confine wealth beyond spending, and should load his neck with pearls from the Red Sea, and should plough his luxuriant fields with a hundred oxen, yet gnawing care will not desert him while he lives, nor will his fleeting wealth accompany him in death.

SIDE I, Band 8: (Elizabethan English)

Queen Elizabeth in 1593 at the age of sixty prepared a translation of the Consolation which is of singular interest, despite its lack of polish. She completed the work in less than a month, dictating part of it to her Clerk of the Signet and writing the remainder herself in her own somewhat irregular spelling.

The manuscript, which is still extant, thus preserves a first-hand example of the Queen’s English. (The recorded reading attempts to suggest the manner in which the words would have been pronounced in her day.)


Thoght riche man with flowing golden golfe, Covetous, hepes not rechis that suffisce, His neck adornes with gemon of Redsse Sea, With hundred oxe the fruitful flids doth til: Yet eating care leves not him quicke, Nor ded the fliting good accompanis.

SIDE I, Band 9: (Middle English)

Chaucer, much of whose greatest poetry is colored by Boethius, prepared a prose translation of the Consolation about 1380 in the Middle English spoken in London in his own day.


Al weere it so that a riche covetous man hadde a ryver or a goter fietyng al of gold, yit sholde it neuer stauchen his covetise; and though he hadde his nekke charged with precous stones of the Rede See, and though he do ere his feeldes plenteous with an hundred oxen, neuer se schal his bytynges brysynesse forleest hym whil he lyveth, ne the lyghte richesses ne schal nat beren hym companye when he is deed.

SIDE I, Band 10: (Old English)

Alfreth the Grete, the scholare-king who ruled the West Saxons from 871 to 899, prepared for his people,
some two years before he died, a free prose translation of the Consolation in their own dialect of Old English.


Tha se Wisdom thas this spell ased hafde, tha oorgan he eft giddian and thus singende cwaeth: Hwael freum byth tham welgan gitsee thaat he cegaderige ungerim thissa welena, and selcec gimcynnnes genog begite, and thee he erige his land mid thousand eala, and thee eall thes middaneard sige his anwealde undertheoded, ne laet he his nanwunht of this middanearde mid him mare thome he brohte hider.

When Wisdom had spoken this utterance, then he began again to entune and thus singing said: "What profit is there for the wealthy miser though he gather untold quantity of these stores, and gain a supply of every kind of gem, and though he till his fields with a thousand ploughs, and though all this middle-earth be subject to his control? He could not take with him from this earth one whot the more than he brought here."

SIDE I, Band 12: (Old English)

About 900 or later, a group of psalms were turned into somewhat irregular alliterative Old English verse by a poet who was certainly not at home in the formal tradition of Old English heroic verse. Its very simplicity, however, gives this translation an appropriate charm.


Rejoice you now greatly in the mighty lord, all this earth in her vigor, and with pleasure boldly serve God.

Go ye all joyfully into his sight. Know truly that he is God the ruler. He made us, and we are his. We are his people and his faithful sheep, all of whom he has fed on his pasture. Go now into his doors, acknowledge God, and exult in him in the dwelling places with great joy in songs of praise. Praise the name of the lord, for he is gentle in anger. Thy mood is mild towards the sons of men.

SIDE I, Band 13: (Middle English)

This is a translation of the same psalm into prose in the later Wycliff version. (See Band 4.) For comparison, the version in the Great Bible (1539-40) is printed below; this latter rendering is widely familiar through its use in the Order for Morning Prayer as first prescribed in the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer in 1549 and still in use.


What better is it for the wealthy, world-greedy one in his mind even though he own much of gold and gems and every good thing, untold possessions, and though for him every day a thousand acres shall be ploughed; though this middle-earth and race of men under the sun, south, west, and east, be subject all to his control? He cannot carry off from this world one whit the more of these treasures, these hoarded properties, than he brought hither.

PSALM TWENTY-THREE (Vulgate)

SIDE I, Band 14: (Middle English)

This translation is taken from the same Wycliff version listed in the description of Band 13.

Text: As above, pp. 77-78.

PSALM XXII (XXIII)

The Lord goseren he, and no thing schal false to me; in the place of pasture there he hath set me. He nourished me on the waite of refreischynge; he conserved my soul. He led me forth on the pathis of elgifsomhe; for his name. For whi thou Y schal go in the mydins of schadewe of death; Y schal not deede yees, for thou art with me. Thu yerde and thi saf; the han cosfotforde me. Thou hast mass red a bord in my sitt; symen hem that trobene me. Thou hast mass fat nyn heed with cyle; and my copp, 6 fillings gretti, is ful cleen. And thi merci schal soo me; in alle the daies of my lif. And that Y dwelle in the haws of the Lord; in to the laigne of daies.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is
in heaven.
Give us this day our supersubstantial
bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation.
But deliver us from evil.
Amen.

Psalm 23.

The Lord is my shepherd, I'll not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for his own name's sake.
Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
yet will I fear none ill:
For thou art with me; and thy rod and
thy staff comfort me.
My table is prepared before me;
My cup is filled with all good things.
Thy goodness and mercy all my life
shall surely follow me:
And in thy house for evermore
my dwelling-place shall be.

The Lord's Prayer (Matthew vi. 9–13)

This version first appeared in the New Testament
published in 1532 by English Catholic refugees at
Rheims; in 1609–10 they published a version of the
Old Testament, the two together now being known
familiarly as the Douai Bible from the place of
printing of the latter. This translation exercised
some influence upon the Protestant Authorized
version but differs from it particularly in that it
was translated from the Latin Vulgate, rather than
the original Hebrew and Greek, and adopted many
Latinate words. Thus, "daily bread" (in Greek
αρτον επισευμιόν) is rendered "supersubstantial
bread" because the Vulgate reads panem super-
substantiam.

Thus therefore shall you pray:
Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.

Psalm 23.

This metre version has retained favor through its
adoption into the Scottish Psalter compiled in 1650.
Originating from the revision of earlier translations
approved by the Westminster Assembly of 1643, it has
become particularly associated with Scottish
Presbyterianism. (The reading does not reproduce
the pronunciation of the period.)

This version, in striking contrast with those produced
in the Elizabethan period when our vocabulary
was rapidly expanding, is written in Basic English;
a system devised in the twentieth century by C. K.
Ogden to limit the vocabulary to an agreed list of
850 words (or 1000 for Biblical use).

Text: The Bible in Basic English (E. P. Dutton
& Co., 1948).

9 Let this then be your prayer; Our Father
in heaven, may your name be kept holy.
10 Let your kingdom come. Let your plea-
sure be done, as in heaven, so on earth.
11 Give us this day bread for our needs.
12 And make us free of our debts, as we
have made those free who are in debt to us.
13 And let us not be put to the test, but keep
us safe from the Evil One.

Psalm 23.

Remember now thy Creator in
the days of thy youth,
while the sun draweth nigh;
while the sun draweth nigh,
when thou shalt say, I have no
pleasure in them;
2 While the sun, or the light,
or the moon, or the stars,
be not darkened,
or the clouds return after the rain:
3 In the day when the keepers of the
house shall tremble,
and the strong men shall bow themselves,
and the hand maidsens shall be
made afraid;
4 The lions, though they have
no young, shall be disturbed
and the goats shall show overt their
mouths;
5 Then shall the dust return to
the earth as it was;
and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Psalm 23.

Remember also your Creator in the days of your
youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw
nigh, when you will say, "If only it were the days
that are gone, or the years that were before the
sun and the light, and the moon, and the stars were
darkened, and the clouds return after the rain;" in the
day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the
strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because
they are few, and those that look through the windows
are dimmed; and the doors on the streets are shut;
when the sound of the grinders is low, and one rises
up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of song
are brought low; "they are afraid also of what is high,
and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms,
the grasshopper

Psalm 23.

This is the later Wycliff translation (see Band 4).
Comparison with the Authorized Version printed be-
low will show that here it fails to match the lyrical
sweep achieved by the more famous translation in
choice of words and balance of phrases.


Haste thou mynd on thi creator in the daies of thi
gonghte, before thi tymge of thi turment come, and the
peris of thi deh nege, of whiche thu shalt see, Tha plesen
not me. Haste thou mynd on thi creator, biot that the

Psalm 23.

This is the Reformed Standard Version of the
Old Testament published in 1952 for the
purpose of changing the Authorized Version
wherever the meaning would be misunderstood
by modern readers or was inconsistent with
the interpretation of the original reached by modern
scholarship.

Text: The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version
(Thomas Nelson & Sons, Old Testament, 1952;

12 Remember also your Creator in the days of your
youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw
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brings itself along and desire fails; because man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

CAXTON ON CHANGE

SIDE I, Band 20: (Early Modern English)

William Caxton (1422-91) makes this comment on the variations of dialects and changes in language which he had noticed during his own lifetime. It appears in the preface to his Enéidos (1490), a translation of a French prose romance. His specific example arises from the fact that the native English word 'egg', which was still preserved in some dialects, was being replaced by the borrowed Norse word 'eg', another form of the same Germanic root. In perspective, we can now add that the language was undergoing considerable changes in the pronunciation of all long stressed vowels and in the silencing of all final unstressed vowels, and that the London dialect was beginning to emerge as a model of cultured speech.


Some gentlemen which late blamed me, saying that in my translations I had over curious terms, which could not be understood of common people, and desired me to use old and homely terms in my translations. And they seem I should satisfy every man, and so to do took an old book and read therein, and certainly the English was so rude and broad that I could not well understand it. And also my Lord Abbot of Westminster did do show to me lately certain evidences written in old English, for to reduce it into our English now used. And certainly it was written in such wise as it was more like to Dutch than English, I could not reduce it to be understood. And certainly our language now used varieith far from that which was used and spoken when I was born. For we Englishmen are born under the dominion of the moon, which is never steadfast but ever wavering, waxing one season and waning and decreasing another season. And that common English that is spoken in one shire varieith from another, insomuch that in my days happened that certain merchants were in a ship in Thames for to have sailed over the sea into Zealand, and for lack of wind they tarried at Foreland, and went to land for to refresh them. And one of them named Sheffield, a mercer, came into a house and asked for meat, and especially he asked after eggs; and the goodwife answered that she could speak no French, and the merchant was angry, for he also could speak no French, but would have had eggs, and she understood him not. And then at last another said, that he would have 'eyern'; then the goodwife said that she understood it well. To what should a man in these days now write, eggs or eyern? Certainly it is hard to please every man because of the diversity and change of language. For in these days every man that is any reputation in his country will utter his communication and matters in such manners and terms that few men shall understand them. And some honest and great clerks have been with me and desired me to write the most curious terms that I could find; and thus between plain, rude and curious I stand abashed. But in my judgment the common terms that be daily used be lighter to be understood than the old and ancient English.

SIDE II - CHANGING LITERARY STYLE

Literary style alters independently of linguistic change, for the style of any important writer is determined by his individual personality and his attitude towards his materials. The many treatments of the perennially attractive legend of King Arthur offer excellent examples.

Arthur, who historically may have been a sixth-century war-leader of Romano-British stock, was first raised to the rank of a legendary hero by the Celtic-speaking inhabitants of Britain, not by the English-speaking invaders, whose enemy he would have been. After the further invasion of Britain by the Normans in 1066, however, he gradually became the national hero of the entire country, and each age has reinterpreted his significance afresh.

ARTHUR'S FEAST AT CAERLEON

SIDE II, Band 1: (Twelfth-century Latin, translated)

The earliest detailed literary elaboration of Arthur's conquests now extant is Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain, written in Latin prose about 1138-39. Geoffrey facetiously offers to supplement the histories of the kings of England, which were being conscientiously compiled in his age, by providing a history of the British (that is, non-Roman, non-English) realm from its foundation by the entirely legendary Brutus down to the seventh century.


When the high festival of Whitsunide began to draw nigh, Arthur, filled with exceeding great joy at having achieved so great success, was fain to hold high court, and to set the crown of the kingdom upon his head, to convene the Kings and Dukes that were his vassals to the festival so that he might the more worshipfully celebrate the same, and renew his peace more firmly amongst his barons. Howbeit, when he made known his desire unto his familiars, he, by their counsel, made choice of Caerleon wherein to fulfill his design. For, situated in a passing pleasant position on the river Usk in Glamorgan, not far from the Severn sea, and abounding in wealth above all other cities, it was the place most meet for so high a solemnity. For on the one side thereof flowed the noble river aforesaid whereby the Kings and Princes that should come from oversea might be borne therin in their ships; and on the other side, gridded about with meadows and woods, passing fair was the magnificence of the kingly palaces thereof with the gilded verges of the roofs that imitated Rome. Howbeit, the chiefest glories thereof were the two churches, one raised in honour of the Martyr Julius, that was right fair grace by a convent of virgins that had dedicated them unto God, and the second, founded in the name of the blessed Aaron, his companion, the minstrels whereof were a brotherhood of canons regular, and this was the cathedral church of the third Metropolitan See of Britain. It had, moreover, a school of two hundred philosophers learned in astronomy and in the other arts, that did diligently observe the courses of the stars, and did by true inferences forecast the prodigies which at that time were about to befall unto King Arthur. Such was the city, famed for such abundance of things delightsome, that was now busking her for the festival that had been proclaimed. Messengers were sent forth into the divers kingdoms, and all that owed allegiance throughout the Gauls and the neighbour islands were invited unto the court.

For at that time was Britain exalted unto so high a pitch of dignity as that it did surpass all other kingdoms in plenty of riches, in luxury of adornment, and in the courteous wit of them that dwelt therein. Whatev'ry knight in the land was of renown for his prowess did wear his clothes and his arms all of one same colour. And the dames, no less witty, would apparel them in like manner in a single colour, nor would they deign have the love of none save he had thrice approved him in the wars. Wherefore at that time did dames wax chaste and knights the nobler for their love.

THE ROUND TABLE

SIDE II, Band 2: (Middle English)

Geoffrey's History was retold in Anglo-Norman verse for an aristocratic but less learned audience by the poet Wace, and this version was in turn reworked for the native English audience at the end of the twelfth century by Layamon, a parish priest in Worcestershire. The legend of the Round Table is not mentioned by Geoffrey and is only briefly outlined by Wace. Layamon amplifies it considerably, perhaps with the help of traditions collected in near-by Wales. His verse-form represents a partial transition from
the alliterative measures of pre-Conquest Old English poetry to the new rime verse adopted in the Middle English period through imitation of French and Anglo-Norman poetry.


Soethen hit seith in there tale, the king ferde to Cornwall.
Ther him com to anan that was a crafty weorcman,
And thera king imette, and feiere him graetly.
"Hail aso thu, Arthur, athelest kynge.
Ich con of treo-wyrkes wunder feole craftes,
Ich thierde suggen bi-yeonde sae neowe tiden.
That thene cynites thate thine borde gunnen fihte
A midwinteres dae; moni thera feolle;
For heore muckle mode morth-gommyn wrothet;
And for heore hehge cine acic wolde beon withinne.
Ah ich the wulle wurche a bord swithe hende
That ther maghen seten to sixtene hundred and ma,
Al turn abuten, that nan beon withuten,
Withuten and withinne, mon to-yaetnes monne.
Whenne thu wult riden, with the thu miht hit leden,
And setten hit whar thu wulle after thine wille;
And ne dert thu navere adrede to there worlede longen.
That aevere aene modi cynite at thine borde makie fht,
For thera seal the hehge beon aefne than loghe.
Timber me lete biwinnen and that beord biginnen."

To feowuer wykene virste that were wes ivorthed,
To ane hege daie that hired was isommed,
And Arthur himself beh sone to than borde,
And hehte alle his cynites to than borde forrihtes.
Theo alle woren iseten cynites to heore mete,
Thea spaced acic with other alse hit were his brother.
Alle heo seten abuten; nes ther nen withuten.
Aevereacelches cunnes cynht there wes swithe wel idhnt.
Alle heo worenie bi ane, the hehge and tha laghe;
Ne mihte ther nan yelpeth for otheri kunnen scenen,
Other his iweren the at than beorde weoren.

This wes that like bord that Bruttes of yelpeth
And sugheth feole cunne lesinge bi Arthure than kinge.
Swa deth aver alc mon the other luyven con;
Yfe he is him to leof thenne wule he lighen,
And suggen on him wurthescipe mare thenne he beon wurthe;
Ne beo he no swa luther mon that his freond him wel ne on.
Aeft, yf on volke feodscipe arereth
An aever aei time betweene twon monnen,
Me con bi than laetha lasinge suggen,
Theher he were the besste mon the aever aet at borde,
The mon the him weore iath, him cuthe last finden,
Ne al soth ne al les that leod-scope singeth;
Ah this is that soththe bi Arthure than kinge;
Nes naever ar swulc king, swa duhyi thurh alle thing.
For that soth stond a than writen hu hit is iwhurthen;
Orf from than aemden; of Arthure than kinge,
No mare no lasse buten alse his laghe deoren.

Afterwards, it says in the tale, the king fared to Cornwall. There came one to him then who was a skilfull carpenter, and met the king and greetet him graciously.

"Hail to you, Arthur, noblest king. I am your owen man. Many a land have I traveled through. In woodwork I am master of skils wondrous many. I have heerd tell over the seas new tidings, that your knights at your table began to fight on a midwinter’s day. Many fell there; out of their high pride they wroughted deadly sport; and because of their high lineage each wished to be on the inside. But I will construct for you a most convenient table, at which sixteen hundred men and more may sit, all in turn, so that none will be on the outside—outside and inside, man opposite man. When you wish to ride out, you can bring it with you, and set it up where you will according to your wish; and you need never dread, to the length of the world, that any proud knight will ever make strife at your table, for there the high shall be equal with the low. Allow me to gather the lumber and begin the table."

By the end of four weeks the work was completed. On a festival day the people were summoned, and Arthur himself came at once to the table, and ordered all his knights to the table forthwith.
When the knights were all seated for their meal, then each spoke to the other as if it were his brother. They were all seated around, nor was any outside. Every rank of knight was very well treated. They were all as one, the high and the low; nor could any there boast of a special serving of drinks different from that given his companions who were at the table.

This was the same table that the Bretons boast of and tell many kinds of lies about Arthur the king. Thus does everyone who loves another; if he is too dear to him, then he will lie and grant him more honor than he is worth; nor is there any man so base that his friend will not wish him well. Again, among people if enmity arises at any time between two men, they will tell lies about the one who is loathed. Though he were the best man that ever ate at table, the man who is loathed to them, they could find objection to. What the people’s poets sing is neither all truth nor all lies. But this is the truth about Arthur the king: there was never before such a king, in all things so mighty. For the truth stands in writing how events came to pass, from beginning to end, with Arthur the king, the more and no less but as his deeds were.

ARTHUR’S FAREWELL TO GUENEVERE

SIDE II, Band 3: (Middle English)

The Alliterative Morte Arthure, from which the reading is taken, was composed about 1350 to 1360 by an anonymous poet writing in the Northwest Midland dialect of Middle English. It tells how Arthur’s attempt at world supremacy through the conquest of Rome was frustrated by the treachery of Mordred. His meter is a skilfull revival of the alliterative measures of Old English poetry. Malory pays compliment to the unknown author’s narrative power by converting the romance into prose in Book V of his own Morte Darthur.


1. Arthur’s Farewell to Gueunevere

Nowe he takest hys leve (and lenges no langere)
At lordes, at legemen but leve hym b’lynen.
And wyse nat worthiliche wy went unto chambyre
For to conforthre he qwenne but in care lenges;
Waysour wayki wyseende hym kyssis,
Talkes to hym tenderly with teres y-newe:
‘I may wery the wyse that this were movede,
That warnes me wychippe of my wedde lorde;
All my lykynge of lyfe owt of lande wendes,
And I in langour am lette, leve ye, for evere!
Why ne myghte I, dere lufe, dyne in your armes,
Are I bya destanye of dyne side drye by myne one?’
IV. The Day of Destiny

As Sir Mordred was roused of all Inglole, he sette making letters as though they had come from beyond the sea. And the letters specified that kyngge Toomere was slayne in batayle with sir Lancelet. Whereforefore Sir Mordred made a parlemente, and called the lordys togeth, and there he made them to chese Themkins kyngge. And so we he crownet at Cansorby, and bydele a feste there thre thretaynes.

And afterwise he drew hym unto Wyncheste, and there he toke Quenwynifier, and seide piritually that he wolde welde her (which was hyms unclay wyff and hyms fadir wyff.) And so he made redy for the feste, and a day preyste that they shouldn be welde, wherefor Quenwynifier was pasing hery. But she durst nat discover her herte, but spake fayre, and agreed to Sir Mordredes wylys.

And anon he desyerly of Sir Mordred to go to London to byge all maner thyngeys that longed to the bydele. And bycausse of her fayre speche Sir Mordred trusted her and gaff her leve, and so when she cam to London she toke the Towe of London, and suddenly in all haste poissible stufed the hert with all maner of vyraTy, and well garnysned hit with men, and so keppe hit.

And whan Sir Mordred wroght that he was pasing wyshowe oure of mesure. And shorle tale to make, he layed a myghty syge about the Towe and made many assaous, and throw engynnye unto them, and shottre grete gunnes. But al myghty nat prevayle, for quen Quenwyner wolde never, for fayre speche myght to nother, for never to trust unto Sir Mordred to com in hyms honte aganye.

Tham cam the Byshop of Cansorbyry, whiche was a noble clerke and a holy man, and thus he seide unto Sir Mordred.

'Sir, why wol ye do? Wol ye fryste displese God and syngh thy shame youself and all kynggrehte? For ys nat kyngge Arthur youre uncle, and no fartheber youre moder brodher, and upon hit be heymeisf begge you, upon hyms owne syppere? Thenhow may me ye wede youre owne fadir wyff? And therefore, sir, seide the Byshop, 'leve thys opeynyon, other ellis I shall curse you with booke, belle and candylwyne.'

'Do thou thy waire, seide Sir Mordred, 'and defighe the!'

'Sir, seide the Byshop, 'wyre you wel I shall nar feare me to do that me ought to do. And also ye noe that my lordes Arthur slayne, and that nat so, and therefore ye well make a foule waikre in thys honte.'

'Poo, thou false pyrieon!' seide Sir Mordred, 'for and thou chauffe me any more, I shall strykhe of thy hede!'

So the Byshop departed, and ded the cunynge in the mohest orguhte wyse that myght be done. And thus Sir Mordred sought the Byshoppe off Cansorby to for to slayen hym. Than the Byshoppe skellte, and tooke parte of hyes good with hym, and wente wygye unto Glassgynghere. And there he was a prest-emynyne in a chappel, and lyved in poverete and in holy prayers; for weell understood that myschevrour waire was at honte.

Than cam there wordes unto Sir Mordred that kyngge Arthur he arayed the syge frome Sir Lanseleot and was comynnyng howarde wythe a grete ore and full length when he asked for his sword, twice in a swoon as if he would faint. He hastened to his palace in the presence of his lords, and spurs his heste away from the palace with his yaliants knights, with a royall troop from the Round Table, and made way to Sandwich; she sees him no more.

ARTHUR’S BETRAYAL

SIDE II, Band 4: (Early Modern English)

Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darte consists of a dramatic reworking of a mass of French and English treatments of the Arthurian legend. It was completed between 1469 and 1470 and was given wider circulation than manuscript copying would have allowed, by Caxton’s printing of it in 1485. Malory’s anachronistic reference in the present excerpt to the shooter of “great guns” marks the end of the era of armored knights on horseback and of the chivalric code. (The reading attempts to suggest only some features of the pronunciation of the period).
