

J.R.R.
TOLKIEN
THE
FALL OF
ARTHUR

Edited by CHRISTOPHER TOLKIEN





THE FALL OF ARTHUR

BY
J.R.R. Tolkien

Edited by Christopher Tolkien



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Foes before them, flames behind them,
ever east and onward eager rode they,
and folk fled them as the face of God,
till earth was empty, and no eyes saw them,
and no ears heard them in the endless hills,
save bird and beast baleful haunting
the lonely lands. Thus at last came they
to Mirkwood's margin under mountain-shadows:
waste was behind them, walls before them;
on the houseless hills ever higher mounting 70
vast, unconquished, lay the veiled forest.
Dark and dreary were the deep valleys,
where limbs gigantic of lowering trees
in endless aisles were arched o'er rivers
flowing down afar from fells of ice.
Among ruinous rocks ravens croaking
eagles answered in the air wheeling;
wolves were howling on the wood's border.
Cold blew the wind, keen and wintry,
in rising wrath from the milling forest 80
among roaring leaves. Rain came darkly,
and the sun was swallowed in sudden tempest.

The endless East in anger woke,
and black thunder born in dungeons
under mountains of menace moved above them.
There halted doubtful ^{then} on high saw they
wan horsemen wild in windy clouds
grey and monstrous grimly riding
shadows-helmed to war, shapes disastrous.
Fierce grew the blast. Their fair banners 90
from their staves were stripped. Steel no longer,
gold nor silver nor gleaming shield
light reflected lost in darkness,
while phantom foes with fell voices

FOREWORD



FOREWORD

It is well known that a prominent strain in my father's poetry was his abiding love for the old 'Northern' alliterative verse, which extended from the world of Middle-earth (notably in the long but unfinished *Lay of the Children of Húrin*) to the dramatic dialogue *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (arising from the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*) and to his 'Old Norse' poems *The New Lay of the Völsungs* and *The New Lay of Gudrún* (to which he referred in a letter of 1967 as 'a thing I did many years ago when trying to learn the art of writing alliterative poetry'). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* he displayed his skill in his rendering of the alliterative verse of the fourteenth century into the same metre in modern English. To these is now added his unfinished and unpublished poem *The Fall of Arthur*.

I have been able to discover no more than a single reference of any kind by my father to this poem, and that is in a letter of 1955, in which he said: 'I write alliterative verse with pleasure, though I have published little beyond the fragments in *The Lord of the Rings*, except 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth' ... I still hope to finish a long poem on *The Fall of Arthur* in the same measure' (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, no.165). Nowhere among his papers is there any indication of when it was begun or when it was abandoned; [but fortunately](#) he preserved a letter written to him by R.W. Chambers on 9 December 1934. Chambers (Professor of English at University College, London), eighteen years his senior, was an old friend and strong supporter of my father, and in that letter he described how he had read *Arthur* on a train journey to Cambridge, and on the way back 'took advantage of an empty compartment to declaim him as he deserves'. He praised the poem with high praise: 'It is very great indeed ... really heroic, quite apart from its value in showing how the *Beowulf* metre can be used in modern English.' And he ended the letter 'You simply *must* finish it.'

But that my father did not do; and yet another of his long narrative poems was abandoned. It seems all but certain that he had ceased to

work on the *Lay of the Children of Húrin* before he left the University of Leeds for Oxford in 1925, and he recorded that he began the *Lay of Leithian* (the legend of Beren and Lúthien), not in alliterative verse but in rhyming couplets, in the summer of that year (*The Lays of Beleriand*, p.3). In addition, while at Leeds he began an alliterative poem on *The Flight of the Noldoli from Valinor*, and another even briefer that was clearly the beginning of a *Lay of Eärendel* (*The Lays of Beleriand*, §II, *Poems Early Abandoned*).

I have suggested in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* (p.5) ‘as a mere guess, since there is no evidence whatsoever to confirm it, that my father turned to the Norse poems as a new poetic enterprise [and a return to alliterative verse] after he abandoned the Lay of Leithian near the end of 1931.’ If this were so, he must have begun work on *The Fall of Arthur*, which was still far from completion at the end of 1934, when the Norse poems had been brought to a conclusion.

In seeking some explanation of his abandonment of these ambitious poems when each was already far advanced, one might look to the circumstances of his life after his election to the Professorship of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford in 1925: the demands of his position and his scholarship and the needs and concerns and expenses of his family. As through so much of his life, he never had enough time; and it may be, as I incline to believe, that the breath of inspiration, endlessly impeded, could wither away; yet it would emerge again, when an opening appeared amid his duties and obligations – and his other interests, but now with a changed narrative impulse.

No doubt there were in fact specific reasons in each case, not now to be with any certainty discerned; but in that of *The Fall of Arthur* I have suggested ([see here](#)) that it was driven into the shallows by the great sea-changes that were taking place in my father’s conceptions at that time, arising from his work on *The Lost Road* and the publication of *The Hobbit*: the emergence of Númenor, the myth of the World Made Round and the Straight Path, and the approach of *The Lord of the Rings*.

One might surmise also that the very nature of this last, elaborate poem made it peculiarly vulnerable to interruption or disturbance. The astonishing amount of surviving draft material for *The Fall of Arthur* reveals the difficulties inherent in such use of the metrical form that my father found so profoundly congenial, and his exacting and perfectionist concern to find, in an intricate and subtle narrative, fitting expression

within the patterns of rhythm and alliteration of the Old English verse-form. To change the metaphor, *The Fall of Arthur* was a work of art to be built slowly: it could not withstand the rising of new imaginative horizons.

Whatever may be thought of these speculations, *The Fall of Arthur* necessarily entailed problems of presentation to the editor. It may be that some who take up this book would have been content with no more than the text of the poem as printed here, and perhaps a brief statement of the stages of its development, as attested by the abundant draft manuscripts. On the other hand, there may well be many others who, drawn to the poem by the attraction of its author but with little knowledge of ‘the Arthurian legend’, would wish, and expect, to find some indications of how this ‘version’ stands in relation to the mediaeval tradition from which it arose.

As I have said, my father left no indication even of the briefest kind, as he did of the ‘Norse’ poems published as *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, of his thought or intention that lay behind his very original treatment of ‘The Legend of Lancelot and Guinevere’. But in the present case there is clearly no reason to enter the labyrinth in an editorial attempt to write a wide-ranging account of ‘Arthurian’ legend, which would very likely appear a forbidding rampart raised up as if it were a necessary preliminary to the reading of *The Fall of Arthur*.

I have therefore dispensed with any ‘Introduction’ properly so-called, but following the text of the poem I have contributed several commentaries, of a decidedly optional nature. The brief notes that follow the poem are largely confined to very concise explanations of names and words, and to references to the commentaries.

Each of these, for those who want such explorations, is concerned with a fairly distinct aspect of *The Fall of Arthur* and its special interest. The first of these, ‘The Poem in Arthurian Tradition’, simple in intent, avoiding speculative interpretation, and very limited in range, if somewhat lengthy, is an account of the derivation of my father’s poem from particular narrative traditions and its divergences from them. For this purpose I have chiefly drawn upon two works in English, the mediaeval poem known as ‘The Alliterative Morte Arthure’, and the relevant tales of Sir Thomas Malory, with some reference to his sources. Not wishing to provide a mere dry précis, I have cited verbatim a number of passages from these works, as exemplifying those traditions in manner

and mode that differ profoundly from this ‘Alliterative Fall of Arthur’ of another day.

After much deliberation I have thought it best, because much less confusing, to write this account as if the latest form of the poem (as printed in this book) were all that we could know of it, and the strange evolution of that form revealed by the analysis of the draft texts had therefore been lost. I have seen no need to enter into the shadowy origins of the Arthurian legend and the early centuries of its history, and I will only say here that it is essential to the understanding of *The Fall of Arthur* to recognize that the roots of the legend derive from the fifth century, after the final end of the Roman rule in Britain with the withdrawal of the legions in 410, and from memories of battles fought by Britons in resistance to the ruinous raids and encroachments of the barbarian invaders, Angles and Saxons, spreading from the eastern regions of their land. It is to be borne in mind that throughout this book the names *Britons* and *British* refer specifically and exclusively to the Celtic inhabitants and their language.

Following ‘The Poem in Arthurian Tradition’ is a discussion of ‘The Unwritten Poem and its Relation to *The Silmarillion*’, an account of the various writings that give some indication of my father’s thoughts for the continuation of the poem; and then an account of ‘The Evolution of the Poem’, primarily an attempt to show as clearly as I could, granting the extremely complex textual history, the major changes of structure that I have referred to, together with much exemplification of his mode of composition.

Note. Throughout this book references to the text of the poem are given in the form canto number (Roman numeral) + line number, e.g. [II.7](#).

THE FALL OF ARTHUR



I

How Arthur and Gawain went to war and rode into the East.

Arthur eastward in arms purposed
his war to wage on the wild marches,
over seas sailing to Saxon lands,
[from the Roman realm](#) ruin defending. 5
Thus the tides of time to turn backward
and the heathen to humble, his hope urged him,
that with harrying ships they should hunt no more
on the shining shores and shallow waters
of South Britain, [booty seeking](#).
As when the earth dwindles in autumn days 10
and soon to its setting the sun is waning
under mournful mist, then a man will lust
for work and wandering, while yet warm floweth
blood sun-kindled, so burned his soul
after long glory for a last assay 15
of pride and prowess, to the proof setting
will unyielding in war with fate.
So fate fell-woven forward drave him,
and with malice Mordred his mind hardened,
saying that war was wisdom and waiting folly. 20
‘Let their fanes be felled and their fast places
bare and broken, burned their havens,
and isles immune from march of arms
or Roman reign now reek to heaven
in fires of vengeance! [Fell thy hand is](#), 25
fortune follows thee—fare and conquer!
And Britain the blessed, thy broad kingdom,
I will hold unharmed till thy home-coming.
Faithful hast thou found me. But what foe dareth
war here to wake or the walls assail 30
of this island-realm while Arthur liveth,
if the Eastern wolf in his own forest
at last embayed must for life battle?’
So Mordred spake, and men praised him,
Gawain guessed not guile or treason 35
[in this bold counsel](#); he was for battle eager,
in idle ease the evil seeing
that had rent asunder the Round Table.

Thus Arthur in arms eastward journeyed,
and war awoke in the wild regions. 40
Halls and temples of the heathen kings
his might assailed marching in conquest
[from the mouths of the Rhine o’er many kingdoms](#).

[Lancelot he missed](#); [Lionel and Ector](#),
 Bors and Blamore to battle came not; 45
 yet mighty lords remained by him:
 Bediver and Baldwin, Brian of Ireland,
[Marrac and Meneduc](#) from their mountain-towers;
 Errac, and Iwain of Urien's line
 that was king in Reged; Cedivor the strong 50
 and the queen's kinsman Cador the hasty.
 Greatest was Gawain, whose glory waxed
 as times darkened, true and dauntless,
 among knights peerless ever anew proven,
 defence and fortress of a falling world. 55
 As in last sortie from leaguered city
 so Gawain led them. As a glad trumpet
 his voice was ringing in the van of Arthur;
 as a burning brand his blade wielded
 before the foremost flashed as lightning. 60

[Foes before them](#), flames behind them,
[ever east and onward](#) eager rode they,
 and folk fled them as the face of God,
 till earth was empty, and no eyes saw them,
 and no ears heard them in the endless hills, 65
 save bird and beast baleful haunting
 the lonely lands. Thus at last came they
[to Mirkwood's margin](#) under mountain-shadows:
 waste was behind them, walls before them;
[on the houseless hills](#) ever higher mounting 70
 vast, unvanquished, lay the veiled forest.
 Dark and dreary were the deep valleys,
 where limbs gigantic of lowering trees
 in endless aisles were arched o'er rivers
 flowing down afar from fells of ice. 75
 Among ruinous rocks ravens croaking
 eagles answered in the air wheeling;
 wolves were howling on the wood's border.
 Cold blew the wind, keen and wintry,
 in rising wrath from the rolling forest 80
 among roaring leaves. Rain came darkly,
 and the sun was swallowed in sudden tempest.

The endless East in anger woke,
 and black thunder born in dungeons
 under mountains of menace moved above them. 85
 Halting doubtful there on high saw they
 wan horsemen wild in windy clouds
 grey and monstrous grimly riding
 shadow-helmed to war, shapes disastrous.
 Fierce grew the blast. Their fair banners 90
 from their staves were stripped. Steel no longer,
 gold nor silver nor gleaming shield
 light reflected lost in darkness,
 while phantom foes with fell voices
 in the gloom gathered. Gawain loudly 95
 cried as a clarion. Clear went his voice

in the rocks ringing above roaring wind
 and rolling thunder: 'Ride, forth to war,
 ye hosts of ruin, hate proclaiming!
 Foes we fear not, nor fell shadows 100
 of the dark mountains demon-haunted!
 Hear now ye hills and hoar forest,
 ye awful thrones of olden gods
 huge and hopeless, hear and tremble!
 From the West comes war that no wind daunteth, 105
 might and purpose that no mist stayeth;
 lord of legions, light in darkness,
 east rides Arthur!' Echoes were wakened.
 The wind was stilled. The walls of rock
 'Arthur' answered.

[There evening came](#) 110

with misty moon moving slowly
 through the wind-wreckage in the wide heavens,
 where strands of storm among the stars wandered.
 Fires were flickering, frail tongues of gold
 under hoary hills. In the huge twilight 115
 gleamed ghostly-pale, on the ground rising
 like elvish growths in autumn grass
 in some hollow of the hills hid from mortals,
 the tents of Arthur.

Time wore onward.

Day came darkly, dusky twilight 120
 over gloomy heights glimmering sunless;
 in the weeping air the wind perished.
 Dead silence fell. Out of deep valleys
 fogs unfurling floated upward;
 dim vapours drowned, dank and formless, 125
 the hills under heaven, the hollow places
 in a fathomless sea foundered sunken.
 Trees looming forth with twisted arms,
 like weeds under water where no wave moveth,
 out of mist menaced man forwandered. 130
 Cold touched the hearts of the host encamped
[on Mirkwood's margin](#) at the mountain-roots.
 They felt the forest though the fogs veiled it;
 their fires fainted. Fear clutched their souls,
 waiting watchful in a world of shadow 135
 for woe they knew not, no word speaking.

Far and faintly ere the fall of eve
 they heard a horn in the hills trembling,
 forlorn and lonely, like lost voices
 out of night at sea. Nearer it sounded. 140
 Now hoofs they heard, a horse neighing,
 watchmen calling. Woe had found them.
 From the West came word, winged and urgent,
 of war assailing the walls of Britain.

Lo! [Cradoc](#) was come the king seeking 145
 down perilous ways their path trailing
 from the mouths of the Rhine o'er many kingdoms
 grimly riding. Neither grey shadows

nor mist stayed him mighty-hearted.
 Haggard and hungry by his horse standing 150
 to Arthur told he evil tidings:
 'Too long my lord from your land ye tarry!
[While war ye wage](#) on the wild peoples
 in the homeless East, a hundred chiefs
 their seahorses swift and deadly 155
 have harnessed in havens of the hidden islands.
 Dragon-prowed they drive over dark billows;
 on shores unguarded shields are gleaming
 and black banners borne amid trumpets.
[Wild blow the winds](#) of war in Britain! 160
 York is leaguered, yielded Lincoln;
 unto Kent kindled the coast blazeth.
 Hither have I hardly hunted riding
 on the sea pursued to your side hastened,
 treason to tell you. Trust not Mordred! 165
 He is false to faith, your foes harbours,
 with lords of Lochlan league he maketh,
 out of Almain and Angel allies hireth,
 coveting the kingdom, to the crown reaching
 hands unholy. Haste now westward!' 170

*

A while then Arthur white with anger
 there sat in silence. Thus sudden fortune
 had turned and betrayed him. In twenty battles
 he had fought and conquered; his foes were scattered,
 neath his hand were humbled heathen chieftains. 175
 Now from hope's summit headlong falling
 his heart foreboded that his house was doomed,
 the ancient world to its end falling,
 and the tides of time turned against him.

[Swift then sent he to summon Gawain](#) 180
 bold in counsel. Bitter words he spake;
 the evil tidings all he told him.
[Now for Lancelot](#) I long sorely,
 and we miss now most the mighty swords
 of Ban's kindred. Best meseemeth 185
 swift word to send, service craving
 to their lord of old. To this leagued treason
 we must power oppose, proud returning
 with matchless might Mordred to humble.'

[Gawain answered](#) grave and slowly: 190
 'Best meseemeth that Ban's kindred
 abide in Benwick and this black treason
 favour nor further—yet I fear the worse:
[thou wilt find thy friends](#) as foes meet thee.
 If Lancelot hath loyal purpose 195
 let him prove repentance, his pride forgoing,
 uncalled coming when his king needeth!
 But fainer with fewer faithfulhearted
 would I dare danger, than with doubtful swords

and tarnished shields of truant lieges	200
our muster swell. Why more need we?	
Though thou legions levy through the lands of Earth,	
fay or mortal, from the Forest's margin	
to the Isle of Avalon , armies countless ,	
never and nowhere knights more puissant,	205
nobler chivalry of renown fairer,	
mightier manhood under moon or sun	
shall be gathered again till graves open.	
Here free unfaded is the flower of time	
that men shall remember through the mist of years	210
as a golden summer in the grey winter.	
And Gawain hast thou. May God keep us	
in hope allied, heart united,	
as the kindred blood in our bodies courseth,	
Arthur and Gawain! Evil greater	215
hath fled aforetime that we faced together.	
Now in haste is hope! While hate lingers,	
and uncertain counsel secret ponders,	
as wroth as wind let us ride westward,	
and sail over sea with sudden vengeance!	220

*

II

How the Frisian ship brought news, and Mordred gathered his host and went to Camelot seeking the queen.

Dark wind came driving over deep water,
from the South sweeping surf upon the beaches,
a roaring sea rolling endless
huge hoarcrested hills of thunder.
The world darkened. Wan rode the moon 5
through stormy clouds streaming northward.

From France came flying a fleet vessel
dark and dragon-prowed, dreadly carven,
sable-shrouded, on the sea leaping,
by the waves hunted as a wild creature 10
among hungry hounds. The horns of the wind
were its mort blowing. Men were calling,
to their gods crying with grim voices,
as it rode to wreck with riven timbers
in the mouths of the sea. The moon glittered 15
in the glaring eyes upon their grey faces
death outstaring. Doom o'ercame them.

[Mordred was waking.](#) His mind wandered
in dark counsels deep and secret.
[From a window looked he](#) in western tower: 20
drear and doubtful day was breaking,
grey light glimmered behind gates of cloud.
About the walls of stone wind was flowing;
sea sighed below, surging, grinding.
[He heard nor heeded:](#) his heart returned 25
to its long thraldom lust-tormented,
to Guinever the golden with gleaming limbs,
[as fair and fell](#) as fay-woman
in the world walking for the woe of men
no tear shedding. Towers might he conquer, 30
and thrones o'erthrow yet the thought quench not.

In her blissful bower on bed of silver
softly slept she on silken pillows
with long hair loosened, lightly breathing,
in fragrant dreams fearless wandering, 35
of pity and repentance no pain feeling,
in the courts of Camelot queen and peerless,
queen unguarded. Cold blew the wind.
His bed was barren; there black phantoms
of desire unsated and savage fury 40
in his brain had brooded till bleak morning.

[A stair he mounted](#) steeply winding
to walls embattled well-wrought of stone.
O'er the weeping world waking coldly
he leant and laughed, lean and tearless. 45
Cocks were crowing. Clamour rose at gate.
[Servants sought him](#) soft-foot running
through hall and bower hunting swiftly.
His eager squire Ivor hailed him
by the dungeon-stair at the door standing: 50
'Lord! Come below! Why alone walk ye?
Tidings await you! Time is spared us
too short for shrift. A ship is landed!'

Mordred came then; and men trembled
at his dark visage drenched with water; 55
wind-tossed his hair, and his words grated:
'Do ye ransack with rabble this royal castle,
Because a ship from storm to shore flieth?'
Ivor him answered: 'On your errand hasting
[the Frisian captain](#) from France cometh 60
on wings of wind, his word keeping,
fate defying. Fate hath conquered.
His ship is broken on the shore lying;
at the door of death he doomed lingers.
All else are dead.' At early day 65
the red rover the rings of gold
repayed to his patron, ere [he passed to hell](#);
shrift he sought not, nor shaven priest,
his latest words to his lord speaking:
'[Cradoc the accursed](#) to the king flying 70
through thy net slipping news untimely
east to Almain ere the hour was ripe
hath brought from Britain. Bare is thy counsel;
in Arthur's ears all is rumoured
of thy deeds and purpose. Dark his anger. 75
[He hastens home](#), and his [host summons](#),
from the Roman marches riding as tempest.
Nine thousand knights draw near the sea;
on northern waves his navy lies,
Whitesand with boats, wherries and barges 80
shipwrights' hammers, shouting seamen,
ringing armour, riders hasting,
is loud and thronging. Look ye to it!
Shining on bulwarks shields are hanging
blazoned in blood-red foreboding war. 85
On the waves they wait and the wind's fury;
lean hounds at leash longships are tugging
on heaving hawsers. Haste now eastward!'

Radbod the Red, rover fearless,
heathen-hearted to hate faithful, 90
died as his doom was. Dark was the morning.
To sea they cast him, of his soul recked not
that walks in the waters, wandering homeless.

Wild rode the wind through the West country.
 Banners were blowing, black was the raven 95
 they bore as blazon. Blaring of trumpets,
 neighing of horses, gnashing of armour,
 in the hoar hollows of the hills echoed.
 Mordred was marching; messengers speeding
 northward and eastward the news bearing 100
 through the land of Logres. Lords and chieftains
 to his side he summoned swift to hasten
 their tryst keeping, true to Mordred,
 faithful in falsehood, foes of Arthur,
[lovers of treason](#), lightly purchased 105
 followers of fortune, and freebooters
 of Erin and Alban and East-Sassoin,
[of Almain and Angel](#) and the isles of mist;
[the crows of the coast](#) [and the cold marshes](#).

He came to Camelot, the queen seeking. 110
 Fiercely heard she his feet hasten
 with striding steps the stair climbing.
 To her bower came he. With burning eyes
 by the door he stood darkly gazing.
 She sat silent no sign giving 115
 at the wide window. Wan gleamed the day
 in her bright tresses bleakly golden.
 Grey her eyes were as a glittering sea;
 glass-clear and chill they his glance challenged
 proud and pitiless. But pale her cheek 120
 for heart misgave her, as one that hounds tameth
 to follow her feet and fawn at hand,
 when wolf unawares walks among them.

Then spake Mordred with his mouth smiling:
 ‘Hail! Lady of Britain! It is long sitting 125
 alone lordless in loveless days,
 a kingless queen in courts that echo
 to no noise of knighthood. Yet never shalt thou
 on earth hereafter thine hours barren
 and life find loveless. Nor less than queen 130
 with dimmed glory thy days revile
 though chances change—if thou choose aright.
 A king courts thee his crown to share,
 his love offering and loyal service.’

Gravely Guinever again answered: 135
 ‘Thou callest thee king, and of crown speakest –
 in his lieu ‘twas lent thee by thy liege-master,
 who liveth yet and reigneth, though long absent.
 For thy love I thank thee and loyal service,
 though due I deem it from dear nephew 140
 to Arthur’s queen.’ Then her eyes wavered,
 and he set her beside him, seized her fiercely.
 Grim words he spake—Guinever trembled:
[‘Now never again from northern wars](#)

shall Arthur enter this island realm, 145
 nor Lancelot du Lake love remembering
 to thy tryst return! Time is changing;
 the West waning, a wind rising
 in the waxing East. The world falters.
 New tides are running in the narrow waters. 150
 False or faithful, only fearless man
 shall ride the rapids from ruin snatching
 power and glory. I purpose so.
Thou at my side shall lie, slave or lady,
 as thou wilt or wilt not, wife or captive. 155
 This treasure take I, ere towers crumble,
 and thrones are o'turned, thirst first will I slake.
 I will be king after and crowned with gold.'

Then the queen took counsel in her cold bosom
 between fear and prudence; feigning wonder, 160
 softly after silence she dissembling spake:
 'My lord, unlooked-for were thy love-speeches,
 and this eager suit thou urgest now;
 new thoughts arise needing counsel!
 Delay allow me and a little respite 165
 ere thou ask my answer! Should Arthur come,
 my plight were perilous. Could thou proof show me
 that thou wilt ride over ruin, wresting kingship
 from troublous times, troth were plighted
 with briefer counsel.' Bitterly laughed he: 170
 'What proof of power shall prisoner seek,
 captive of captor? Be I king or earl,
 'twixt bride and bond brief be the choosing!
 Needs must tonight that I know thy mind;
 longer I grant not.' Then his leave took he. 175
Fierce and hasty his feet echoed
 with striding steps on the stone pavement.

Night came slowly. The naked moon
 slipped sudden forth from swathing clouds
 torn by tempest, in a tarn of stars 180
 swam serenely. Riding swiftly
 horsemen hastened. Hooves were beating,
 steel-pointed spears stung with silver.
 Long leagues behind in a low valley
 the lights of Camelot lessened and faded; 185
 before lay forest and the far marches,
 dark roads and dim. Dread pursued them.
 Wolf had wakened in the woods stalking,
 and the hind hardly from hiding driven
 her foe had fled, fear-bewildered, 190
 cowed and hunted, once queen of herds
 for whom harts majestic in horned combat
 had fought fiercely. So fled she now,
 Guinevere the fair in grey mantled,
 cloaked in darkness, from the courts stealing. 195
 Few faithful men her flight aided,
 folk that followed her in former days,

when from Leodegrance to Logres rode
 bride to bridegroom brave and golden
 in mighty Arthur's morning glory. 200
 Now to lonely towers, land deserted,
 where Leodegrance once long ago
 at the Round Table regal feasted,
 she hastened home to harbour cold,
 hiding uncertain. In her heart darkly 205
 she thought of Lancelot, should he learn afar
 of her woe and wandering by wolf hunted.
 If the king were conquered, and the crows feasted,
 would he come at her call, queen and lady
 riding to rescue? Then from ruin haply 210
 were gladness wrested. Guinevere the fair,
 not Mordred only, should master chance
[and the tides of time](#) turn to her purpose.

*

III

Of Sir Lancelot, who abode in Benwick.

[In the South from sleep](#) to swift fury
a storm was stirred, striding northward
over leagues of water loud with thunder
and roaring rain it rushed onward.
Their hoary heads hills and mountains 5
tossed in tumult on the towering seas.
On Benwick's beaches breakers pounding
ground gigantic grumbling boulders
with ogre anger. The air was salt
with spume and spindrift splashed to vapour. 10

[There Lancelot over leagues of sea](#)
in heaving welter from a high window
looked and wondered alone musing.
Dark slowly fell. Deep his anguish.
He his lord betrayed to love yielding, 15
and love forsaking lord regained not;
faith was refused him who had faith broken,
by leagues of sea from love sundered.

[Sir Lancelot](#), Lord of Benwick
of old was the noblest knight of Arthur, 20
among sons of kings kingly seeming,
deemed most daring, in deeds of arms
all surpassing, eagerhearted;
among folk whose beauty as a flower blossomed
in face the fairest, formed in manhood 25
strong and gracious, steel well-tempered.
White his hue was; his hair raven,
dark and splendid; dark his eyes were.
Gold was Gawain, gold as sunlight,
but grey his eyes were gleaming keenly; 30
his mood sterner. By men holden
almost equal envy he knew not,
peer and peerless praising justly,
but to his lord alone his love giving;
no man nor woman in his mind holding 35
dearer than Arthur. Daily watchful
the Queen he doubted, ere the cold shadow
on her great glory grey had fallen.

To Lancelot her love gave she,
in his great glory gladness finding. 40
To his lady only was his love given;

no man nor woman in his mind held he
 than Guinever dearer: glory only,
 knighthood's honour, near his lady
 in his heart holding. High his purpose; 45
 he long was loyal to his lord Arthur,
 among the Round Table's royal order
 prince and peerless, proudly serving
 Queen and lady. But cold silver
 or glowing gold greedy-hearted 50
 in her fingers taken fairer thought she,
 more lovely deeming what she alone treasured
 darkly hoarded. Dear she loved him
 with love unyielding, lady ruthless,
 fair as fay-woman and fell-minded 55
 in the world walking for the woe of men.
 Fate sent her forth. Fair she deemed him
 beyond gold and silver to her grasp lying.
 Silver and golden, as the sun at morning
 her smile dazzled, and her sudden weeping 60
 with tears softened, tender poison,
 steel well-tempered. Strong oaths they broke.

Mordred in secret mirthless watched them
 betwixt hate and envy, hope and torment.
 Thus was bred the evil, and the black shadow 65
 o'er the courts of Arthur as a cloud growing
 dimmed the daylight darkling slowly.
 In evil hour was Agravain
 the dour-handed to death smitten –
 by the door fell he—dear to Gawain. 70
[Swift swords were drawn](#) by sworn brethren
 and the Round Table rent asunder
 in the Queen's quarrel. Cold rang the blades.
 The Queen was taken. With cruel justice
 fair as fay-woman they to fire doomed her, 75
 to death they condemned her. But death waited.
 There Lancelot as lightning came
 amid riding thunder ruthless flaming
 in sudden assault sweeping heedless
 he friends of old felled and trampled, 80
 as trees by tempest torn uprooted.
[Gaheris and Gareth](#) Gawain's brethren
[by the fire fell they](#) as fate willed it.
 From the fire he snatched her; far he bore her;
 fear fell on men, none would follow after; 85
 for Ban's kindred in their battle closed him.

Then rage left him, and his wrath sickened,
 his mood faltered. He mourned too late
 in ruth for the rending of the Round Table.
 His pride he repented, his prowess cursing 90
 that friends had felled, faith had broken.
 For the love longing of his lord Arthur
 he would heal yet honour with his heart's anguish,
 and the queen restore, by the king's mercy

her estate restablish. Strange she deemed him 95
 by a sudden sickness from his self altered.
 From war she shrank not, might her will conquer,
 life both and love with delight keeping
 to wield as she wished while the world lasted;
 but little liked her lonely exile, 100
[or for love to lose](#) her life's splendour.
 In sorrow they parted. With searing words
 his wound she probed his will searching.
[Grief bewrayed her](#) and greed thwarted; 105
 the shining sun was sudden shaded
 in storm of darkness. Strange he deemed her
 from her self altered. By the sea stood he
 as a graven stone grey and hopeless.
 In pain they parted. Pardon found she 110
 by her king's mercy, and men's counsel,
 lest worse befall, war unholy
 among Christian kings, while the crows feasted.
 In the courts of Camelot she was queen again
 great and glorious. Grace with Arthur
 he sought and found not. They his sword refused. 115
 On that knee no more, knight in fealty
 might he hilt handle, nor his head there lay,
 not Lancelot, love forsaking,
[pardon asking](#), with pride humbled.
 Loveforsaken, from the land banished, 120
 from the Round Table's royal order
 and his siege glorious where he sat aforetime
 he went sadly. The salt water
 lay grey behind him.
 Grief knew Arthur 125
 in his heart's secret, and his house him seemed
 in mirth minished, marred in gladness,
 his noblest knight in his need losing.
 Not alone to his land over loud waters
 went Lancelot. Lords of his kindred
 were many and mighty. At their masts floated 130
[the banners of Blamore](#) and of Bors the strong,
 of Lionel, Lavain, and loyal Ector,
 Ban's younger son. They to Benwick sailed
 Britain forsaking. In battle no more
 to Arthur's aid their arms bore they, 135
 but in the towers of Ban tall and dauntless
 watchful dwelt they, war refusing,
 Lancelot their lord with love guarding
 in his days of darkness. Deep his anguish.
 He his lord betrayed to love yielding, 140
 and love forsaking lord regained not,
 by leagues of sea from love sundered.

[From western havens](#) [word was rumoured](#)
 of Arthur arming against his own kingdom,
 how a mighty navy manned with vengeance 145
 he swift assembled that the sudden fury
 of striding storm stayed and hindered.

[Of the Lord of Logres](#), and the leagued treason
 that his throne threatened, thought he darkly:
 now they need would know of knights faithful 150
 to uphold on high the holy crown,
 the west still to wield by the waves' margin,
 walls defending against the world's ruin;
 now they most would miss the mighty swords
 of Ban's kindred and their banners gleaming; 155
 now Lancelot his lord's battle
[should fill with fire](#) as a flame shining.

Then half he hoped, and half wished not,
 to receive summons, swift commandment,
 to king the allegiance loyal recalling 160
 of Lancelot to his lord Arthur.
 Of Guinever again grieving thought he:
 there was woe in Britain, war was kindled;
 were her faith renewed firm and steadfast,
 then she stood in danger. Dear he loved her. 165
 Though in wrath she left him, no ruth showing,
 no pity feeling, proud and scornful,
 dear he loved her. When danger threatened,
 if she sent him summons, swift and gladly
 against tide and tempest trumpet sounding, 170
 he would sail overseas, sword unsheathing
 in land forlorn at the last battle
 by his lady bidden, though his lord shunned him.

[But there came neither](#) from king summons
 nor word from lady. Only wind journeyed 175
 over wide waters wild and heedless.
[Now Gawain's glory, golden riding](#)
 as the westering sun that the world kindles
 ere he red sinketh by the rim of ocean,
 before Arthur blazed, while the East darkened. 180
 Guinever hiding in the grey shadow
 watched and waited, while the world faltered;
 grimhearted grown as gladness waned
 danger weighed she in her dark counsel,
 her hope in havoc, in her heart thinking 185
 men's fate to mould to her mind's purpose.
 And Lancelot over leagues of sea
 looked and pondered alone musing
 doubtful-hearted. Dark had fallen.
 No horn he blew, no host gathered; 190
 he wavered and went not. Wind was roaring
 the towers trembled tempest-shaken.

Dawn came dimly. On the dun beaches
[the foam glimmered](#) faint and ghostly;
 the tide was turning, tempest waning. 195
 Light leapt upward from the long shadow,
 and walking on the water waves kindled,
 as glass glittering green and silver.
 In sombre sleep by the sill drooping

lay Lancelot alone dreaming; 200
 his head was bowed by the high window.
 His eyes opened upon early day:
 the wind still walked in the wide heaven
 lofty faring, but on lowly earth
 peace had fallen. Pools reflected 205
 the slanting sun silver gleaming;
 washed with water the world shimmered;
 bird sang to bird blithe at morning.

His heart arose, as were heavy burden
 lightly lifted. Alone standing 210
 with the flame of morn in his face burning
 the surge he felt of song forgotten
 in his heart moving as a harp-music.
 There Lancelot, low and softly
 to himself singing, the sun greeted, 215
 life from darkness lifted shining
 in the dome of heaven by death exalted.
 Ever times would change and tides alter,
 and o'er hills of morning hope come striding
 to awake the weary, while the world lasted. 220

The hour he knew not, that never after
 it would return in time, tempest bringing,
 to war calling with the wind's trumpet.
 The tides of chance had turned backward,
 their flood was passed flowing swiftly. 225
 Death was before him, and his day setting
 beyond the tides of time to return never
 among waking men, while the world lasted.

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IV

How Arthur returned at morn and by Sir Gawain's hand won the passage of the sea.

Wolves were howling on the wood's border;
the windy trees wailed and trembled,
and wandering leaves wild and homeless
drifted dying in the deep hollows.
Dark lay the road through dank valleys 5
among mounting hills mist-encircled
to the walls of Wales in the west frowning
brownfaced and bare. To the black mountains
horsemen hastened, on the houseless stones
no track leaving. Tumbling waters 10
from the fells falling, foaming in darkness,
they heard as they passed to the hidden kingdom.
Night fell behind. The noise of hooves
was lost in silence in a land of shadow.

*

Dawn came dimly. On the dark faces 15
of the old mountains eastward staring
light was kindled. The land shimmered.
Sun came shining. Silver morning
bathed in water bright ascended
the bare heaven blue and lofty. 20
Beams fell slanting through the boughs of trees
glancing and glimmering in the grey forest;
rain drops running from rustling leaves
like drops of glass dripped and glistened.
No beast was stirring: the birds listened. 25
As wary as wolves through the wood stalking
to the marches rode there Mordred's hunters,
huge and hungry hounds beside them
the fewte followed fiercely baying.
The queen they hunted with cold hatred 30
till their hope failed them amid houseless stones,
halting hungry-eyed under the hills' menace
at the walls of Wales. War was behind them
and woe in Britain. Winds were shifting,
Mordred waiting.
Their message found him 35
by the seaward cliffs in the south-country
sheer and shining. Upon shaven grass
his tents were marshalled, as a town clustered
with lanes and alleys loud with voices
in the dales hidden and on downs rising 40
above Romeril where running water

to the shore had cloven a shallow pathway.
 From the East, from Angel and the isles of mist,
 there kings of Almain their craft mustered,
 under cliff crowding their carven prows 45
 and black banners in the breeze flying.
 Fair wind came foaming over flecked water,
 on gleaming shingle green and silver
 the waves were washing on walls of chalk.
 On a mound of grass Mordred stood there: 50
 ever gazed his eyes out and southward,
 lest Arthur's ships unawares to shore
 the winds should waft. Watchmen he posted
 by the sea's margin in the south-country,
 by night and day the narrow waters 55
 from the hills to heed. There on high raised he
 builded beacons that should blaze with fire,
 if Arthur came, to his aid calling
 his men to muster where he most needed.
 Thus he watched and waited and the wind studied. 60

Ivor hailed him with eager voice
 by his tent standing tall and brooding;
 words unwelcome from the West brought he.
 'O King!' he cried, 'the Queen is lost!
 Her trail faded in the trackless stones; 65
 hound and hunter in the hills faltered.
 To the hidden kingdom and the holy vales
 where Leodegrance once long ago
 lived beleaguered, lord enchanted,
 she hath fled and is free. But few love her. 70
 Fear her no longer, the fay-woman!
 Fell fate take her! May her feet never
 return hither to trouble Mordred!
 From thy mind thrust her! With men deal thou,
 woman forsaking and to war turning! 75
 Thine hour is at hand.' Then his eyes wavered
 and his tongue halted. Turning slowly
 with frown of thunder fiercely Mordred
 gazed on him glaring. 'Begone!' cried he.
 'The master's hour master chooseth. 80
 Nought thou knowest. At need failing
 from vain errand dost venture home
 with tongue untamed to teach Mordred
 thy fool's counsel? Flee mine anger
 unto foul fortune. The fiend take thee!' 85

Alone then long lowering paced he.
 In his bosom there burned under black shadow
 a smouldering fire whose smoke choked him;
 his mind wavered in a maze walking
 between fear and fury. At first his thought 90
 hunger-hunted from his hold wandered
 by lust allured to its long torment.
 But he guessed that Guinever had greeting sent
 by secret servant over sea speeding

to Lancelot, love recalling 95
 and his aid asking in her evil day.
 Should Ban's kindred to battle hasten
[and the fair lily](#) on the field sable
 once more be seen marching proudly
 Arthur to strengthen, ill were boded 100
 to his plot and purpose. Thus he pondered long.
 For Lancelot, lord of Benwick,
 most he hated and yet most dreaded,
 and words of witchcraft well remembered
 that lords of Benwick the lily bearing 105
 in open battle should he ever challenge
 he would reap ruin. Thus wrath with cunning,
 doubt with daring in his dark counsel
 warred uncertain. The wind lessened.
 In cloudless sky clear and golden 110
 the sun at evening summer rekindled
 in a glow sinking. The sea glimmered
 under streaming stars in the steep heaven.
 Day followed day. Dawn came brightly
 with a breeze blowing blithe at morning 115
 cool and keenwingéd. A cry woke him.
 'A sail, a sail on the sea shining!'

Watchmen were calling, wailing voices
 from ward to ward the wind carried,
 and grasping brands guards by the beacons 120
 wakeful waited. No word gave he.
 Eager went his eyes out and southward,
 and sails saw he on the sea climbing.
 Thus came Arthur at early morn
 at last returning to his lost kingdom. 125
 On his shrouds there shone sheen with silver
 a white lady in holy arms
 a babe bearing born of maiden.
 Sun shone through them. The sea sparkled.
 Men marked it well, Mordred knew it, 130
 Arthur's ensign. Yet his eyes wandered;
 for the banner of Benwick breathless looked he,
 silver upon sable. But he saw it not.
 The fair flower-de-luce on its field withered
 drooping in darkness. Doom came nearer. 135
 The sun mounted and the sails whitened.
[Far over the sea](#) faintly sounding
 trumpets heard they. Towering upward
 from Arthur's side eager hastened
 a mighty ship in the morn gleaming 140
 high, white-timbered, with hull gilded;
[on its sail was sewn](#) a sun rising,
 on its brodered banner in the breeze floated
[a fiery griffon](#) golden flaming.
 Thus came Gawain his king guarding 145
 valiant-hearted the vaward leading:
 a hundred ships with hulls shining
 and shrouds swelling and shields swinging.
 Behind beheld they the host faring:

deepweighed dromonds and drawn barges, 150
 galleys and galleons with gear of war,
 six hundred sail in the sun turning,
 fair sight and fell. Flags were streaming;
 ten thousand told targes hung there
 bright on the bulwarks, blazons of princes 155
 and knights of the North and the nine kingdoms
 of Britain the blessed. But Ban's kindred,
[and Lancelot](#) with his lilies came not.

Then Mordred laughed loud and mirthless.
 Word he shouted. Wild were the trumpets. 160
 Beacons were blazing, banners were lifted,
 shaft rang on shield, and the shores echoed.
 War was awakened and woe in Britain.
 Thus came Arthur to his own kingdom
 in power and majesty proud returning 165
 to Romeril where running slowly
 by the shore now weeps a shuddering water.
 Sun shone on swords. Silver-pointed
 the spears sparkled as they sprang upward,
 white as wheatfield. Wheeling above them 170
 the crows were crying with cold voices.
 In the foaming sea flashed a thousand
 swift oars sweeping. Saxon chieftains
 at their stems standing sternly shouted;
 blades they brandished and broad axes, 175
 on their gods calling with grim voices.
 With dread faces dragon-prowed they spurred
 their sea-horses to sudden onset,
 swerving swiftly and swinging inward.
 Beak met bulwark. Burst were timbers. 180
 There was clang of iron and crash of axes;
 sparked and splintered spears and helmets;
 the smiths of battle on smitten anvils
 there dinned and hammered deadly forging
 wrath and ruin. Red their hands were. 185
 About Prydwen pressed they, the proud and fair,
 the ship of Arthur with sheen of silver.

Then Gawain sounded his glad trumpet.
 His great galleon golden shining
 as thunder riding thrust among them 190
 with wind behind her. In her wake followed
 lieges of Lothian, lords and captains.
 Oars were splintered. Iron clave timber,
 and ropes were riven. With rending crash
 masts dismantled as mountain-trees 195
 rushed down rattling in the roar of battle.
[Now grim Galuth](#) Gawain brandished
 his sword renowned—smiths enchanted
 ere Rome was built with runes marked it
 and its steel tempered strong and deadly— 200
 forth leapt he as fire a flame wielding.
[The king of Gothland](#) on his carven prow

he smote to death and to sea drave him;
[upon lords of Lochlan](#) lightning hurled he, 205
 helms boar-crested, heathen standards
 hewed asunder. High rang his voice
 'Arthur' calling. The air trembled
 with thunderous answer thousandfolded.
 As straw from storm, as stalks falling
 before reapers ruthless, as roke flying 210
 before the rising sun wrathful blazing
 his foemen fled. Fear o'ercame them.
 From board and beam beaten fell they,
 in the sea they sank their souls losing.
 Boats were blazing, burned and smoking; 215
 some on shore shivered to shards broken.
 Red ran the tide the rocks staining.
 Shields on the water shorn and splintered
 as flotsam floated. Few saved their lives
 broken and bleeding from that battle flying. 220
 Thus came Arthur to his own kingdom
 and the sea's passage with the sword conquered,
 Gawain leading. [Now his glory](#) shone
 as the star of noon stern and cloudless
 o'er the heads of men to its height climbing 225
 ere it fall and fail. Fate yet waited.
 Tide was turning. Timbers broken,
 dead men and drowned, a dark jetsam,
 were left to lie on the long beaches;
 rocks robed with red rose from water. 230

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V

Of the setting of the sun at Romeril.

Thus Arthur abode on the ebb riding.
At his land he looked and longed sorely
on the grass again there green swaying,
to walk at his will, while the world lasted;
the sweet to savour of salt mingled 5
with wine-scented waft of clover
over sunlit turf seaward leaning,
in kindly Christendom the clear ringing
of bells to hear on the breeze swaying,
a king of peace kingdom wielding 10
in a holy realm beside Heaven's gateway.

On the land he looked lofty shining.
Treason trod there trumpets sounding
in power and pride. Princes faithless
on shore their shields shameless marshalled, 15
their king betraying, Christ forsaking,
to heathen might their hope turning.
Men were mustering marching southward,
from the East hurried evil horsemen
as plague of fire pouring ruinous; 20
white towers were burned, wheat was trampled,
the ground groaning and the grass withered.
There was woe in Britain and the world faded;
bells were silent, blades were ringing
hell's gate was wide and heaven distant. 25

Toll must he pay and trewage grievous,
the blood spending that he best treasured
the lives losing that he loved dearest;
there friends should fall and the flower wither
of fair knighthood, for faith earning 30
the death and darkness, doom of mortals,
ere the walls were won or the way conquered,
or the grass again there green springing
his feet should feel faring homeward.
Never had Arthur need or danger 35
tamed or daunted, turned from purpose
or his path hindered. Now pity whelmed him

and love of his land and his loyal people,
 for the low misled and the long-tempted,
 the weak that wavered, for the wicked grieving. 40
 With woe and weariness and war sated,
 kingship owning crowned and righteous
 he would pass in peace pardon granting,
 the hurt healing and the whole guiding,
 to Britain the blessed bliss recalling. 45
 Death lay between dark before him
 ere the way were won or the world conquered.

[The next sixteen lines were written more hastily on a separate slip of paper.]

For Gawain he called. Gravely speaking
 dark thoughts he showed in his deep trouble.
 'Liege and kinsman loyal and noble, 50
 my tower and targe, my true counsel,
 the path before us to peril leadeth.
 We have won the water. The walls remain,
 and manned with menace might defy they.
 Do we rightly choose ruthless onset, 55
 to traitor keeper toll of death
 to pay for passage, no price counting,
 on dread venture at disadvantage
 all hope to hazard? My heart urgeth
 that best it were that battle waited. 60
[To other landing](#) our arms leading
 let us trust the wind and tide ebbing
 to waft us westward.'

Here ends *The Fall of Arthur* in its latest form.

NOTES ON THE TEXT OF
THE FALL OF ARTHUR



Canto I

- [1–9](#) On King Arthur's campaign into eastern regions [see here](#).
- [21](#) *fanēs*: temples.
- [33](#) *at last embayed* (a pencilled correction of *embayed and leaguered*): No such meaning of a verb *embay* is recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but the sense is obviously 'brought to bay'.
- [44–50](#) Knights of the Round Table. Lionel and Ector (on whom [see here](#)), Bors and Blamore, were kinsmen of Lancelot: Ector was his younger brother. Bedivere is only named here in *The Fall of Arthur*, but he would no doubt have played a part in the aftermath of the battle of Camlan, if my father had reached so far in his narrative ([see here](#)).
- Marrac and Meneduc and Errac are named in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* among the slain at Camlan.
- Reged* was the name of a forgotten kingdom in North Britain. Urien king of Reged and his son Iwain (Ówein) seem to have been in origin historical kings, who became famous in the wars of the North Britons against the Angles in the sixth century.
- Several of these knights appear in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: Lionel, Bors, Bedivere, Errac, Iwain son of Urien (in my father's translation, stanzas 6 and 24).
- [51](#) *Cador the hasty*: my father wrote *fearless* but later pencilled in *hasty* above. One might suppose that in making this change he was thinking of the incident described by Geoffrey of Monmouth, when the letter from the Emperor Lucius was read ([see here](#)). Geoffrey called Cador, Duke of Cornwall, a 'merry' man (*erat laeti animi*): he burst out laughing on that occasion, urging that the Roman challenge be welcomed, for the Britons had become soft and slothful. In *Lazamon's Brut* ([see here](#)) Cador declared *For nauere ne lufede ich longe grið inne mine londe* ('for never loved I long peace in my land'), and for this he

was roundly rebuked by Gawain. But in *The Fall of Arthur* ([1.36–8](#)) it was Gawain who

was for battle eager,
in idle ease the evil seeing
that had rent asunder the Round Table.

[130](#) *forwandered*: wearied with wandering.

[145](#) *Cradoc*: [see here](#).

[160](#) *Wild blow the winds of war in Britain!*: [see here](#).

[167](#) *Lochlan*: the name of a land in Irish legend, here it seems suggesting a remote people hostile to Arthur; it is repeated in [IV.204](#).

[168](#) *Almain*: Germany; *Angel*: the ancient homeland of the Angles in the Danish peninsula.

[185](#), [191–2](#) *Ban's kindred*: King Ban of Benwick in France was the father of Sir Lancelot; [see here](#).

[203–4](#) *From the Forest's margin / to the Isle of Avalon*: [see here](#).

Canto II

[12](#) *mort*: the note blown on a horn at the death of a hunted deer.

[27](#) *Guinever*: my father's spelling of the Queen's name was very various. *Guinever* preponderates, but in the latest text of Canto II, while *Guinever* appears at lines 27, 135, and 143, it is *Guinevere* at 194 and 211; and in the text preceding the last the spellings are *Guinevere*, *Gwenevere*, *Gwenever*.

[50](#) *the dungeon-stair*: *dungeon* is here used in the old sense of the keep or great central tower of a medieval castle.

[52–3](#) *Time is spared us / too short for shrift.* In the earliest version of the canto the text here reads *The sea spares us / a shrift too short* ([see here](#)). The original meaning of ‘short shrift’ was a short space of time in which to make a confession (*shrift*) before death; hence, a brief respite. Cf. II.68 *shrift he sought not*.

[80](#) *Whitesand*: Wissant in the Pas-de-Calais, between Calais and Boulogne.

[86](#) *On the waves they wait and the wind’s fury*: i.e. they wait until the waves and the wind abate.

[101](#) *Logres*: the kingdom of Britain ruled by King Arthur.

[107–8](#) *Erin*: Ireland; *Alban*: Scotland; *East-Sassoin*: East Saxony. For *Almain* and *Angel* [see note to I.168](#).

[198](#),
[202–3](#) *Leodegrance*: King of Camiliard in Wales, father of Guinevere. The mention of the Round Table at line 203 is a reference to the legend that it was made for Uther Pendragon, Arthur’s father. In Malory’s *Tale of King Arthur* Leodegrance learned of Merlin that Arthur wished to have Guinevere for his wife:

‘That is to me,’ seyde kyng Leodegreouns, ‘the beste tydynges that ever I herde, that so worthy a kyng of prouesse and noblesse wol wedde my doughter. And as for my londis, I wolde geff hit hym yf I wyste hyt myght please hym, but he hath londis inow, he nedith none. But I shall sende hym a gyffte that shal please hym muche more, for I shall gyff hym the Table Rounde which Uther, hys fadir, gaff me.’

Canto III

[1](#) *On Benwick’s beaches*: [see note to I.185](#).

[29](#) *Gold was Gawain, gold as sunlight*. Gawain is again likened to the sun later in the poem ([III.177–9](#), ‘the westering sun’; [IV.223–4](#), ‘the star of noon’), and ‘a sun rising’ was sewn on the sail of his ship ([IV.142](#)). But there is no reference to his strength increasing towards noon and then declining, which was an

important element in the story of the siege of Benwick, where Lancelot wounded him grievously when his strength waned ([see here](#)).

[55–6](#) These lines are a closely similar repetition of [II.28–9](#), and reappear in the same form in another text where they are put into the mouth of Sir Lionel ([see here](#)). Their earliest appearance is in the third synopsis, [see here](#).

[62](#) *steel well-tempered*: these words have been applied to Lancelot in line 26 of this canto.

In the manuscript as written the reading was *Strong oaths she broke*, changed in pencil to *they broke*; [see here](#).

[68](#) For the story here briefly suggested [see here](#).

[68–9](#) *Agravain the dour-handed* translates *Agravain a la dure mayn* (as he is called in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, line 110), using *dour* in its old sense ‘hard’.

[82–3](#) *Gaheris and Gareth*: [see here](#).

[86](#) Here and in line 156 the word *battle* is used in the sense ‘battle array’.

[89](#) *ruth*: remorse.

[100](#) *little liked her*: little pleased her.

[104](#) *bewrayed*: betrayed.

[122](#) *siege*: seat.

[140–2](#) These lines are a repetition of 15–16, 18 in this canto.

[148](#) *the Lord of Logres*: King Arthur.

Canto IV

- [29](#) *fewte*: the track of a hunted animal. The word occurs in the accounts of the hunts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as for example *Summe fel in þe fute þer þe fox bade*, in my father's translation (stanza 68) *Some [of the hounds] fell on the line to where the fox was lying*.
- [41](#) *Romeril*: Romney in Kent ([see here](#)).
- [43](#) A partial repetition of [II.108](#).
- [68](#) *Leodegrance*: [see note to II.198](#).
- [98](#) *the fair lily on the field sable*: [see note to IV.134](#).
- [126](#) *sheen*: bright, shining.
- [126–8](#) [According to Geoffrey](#) of Monmouth there was painted on the inside of Arthur's shield Prydwen ([see note to IV.186](#)) an image of the Virgin Mary, so that he might never cease to think of her; and in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* the chief of Arthur's banners before the great sea-battle is thus described:
 Bot thare was chosen in the chefe a chalkewhitte mayden and a
 childe in hir arme, that chefe es of hevynne.
 In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the same is told of Sir Gawain, who on account of his devotion to Mary had (in my father's translation, Stanza 28)
 on the inner side of his shield her image depainted, that when
 he cast his eyes thither his courage never failed.
- [134](#) *flower-de-luce*, or fleur-de-lys, the heraldic lily, the banner of Benwick (132); cf. [IV.98](#), *the fair lily on the field sable* [of Ban's kindred], and [IV.158](#), *Lancelot with his lilies came not*.
- [144](#) *a fiery griffon*. The emblem of a griffon (a beast with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion) is ascribed to Gawain's arms in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (a *gryffoun* of *golde*: [see here](#)); and in notes for the continuation of the poem beyond the point reached ([see here](#)) it is said that his shield bore

the image of a griffon.

[146](#) *vaward*: vanguard.

[150](#) *deepweighed dromonds and drawn barges*. The word *dromonds* occurs in the account of the sea-battle in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, where Arthur's fleet included *dromowndes* and *dragges*. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where this line is cited, *dromond* is glossed 'a very large medieval ship', while *drag* here is defined as 'a float or raft for the conveyance of goods'.

[154](#) *targes*: shields.

[186](#) *Prydwen* was the name given to Arthur's shield by Geoffrey of Monmouth ([see note to IV.126-8](#)), followed by *Lazamon* in the *Brut* ([see here](#)) but in early Welsh poetry it was the name of his ship, as here.

[210](#) *roke*: mist.

Canto V

[26](#) *trewage*: tribute, toll.

THE POEM IN ARTHURIAN TRADITION



THE POEM IN ARTHURIAN TRADITION

More than seven centuries had passed since the departure from Britain of the Roman legions when in the mid-years of the twelfth century, probably about 1136, there appeared a work entitled *Historia Regum Britanniae*, by Geoffrey of Monmouth (who incidentally makes a momentary appearance in my father's work *The Notion Club Papers*, published in *Sauron Defeated*, pp.192, 216). Of this History of the Kings of Britain it was said (by Sir Edmund Chambers, in 1927) that 'no work of imagination, save the *Aeneid*, has done more to shape the legend of a people.' He used the word 'imagination' advisedly. It is said that Geoffrey of Monmouth's book was the source of the 'historical' (as opposed to the 'romance') tradition of King Arthur, but the word is very misleading unless it is understood to mean that Geoffrey's work, while full of marvels and extravagances embedded in a totally unhistorical structure, was nonetheless in 'the mode of history' (a narrative chronicle of events in Latin, soberly told), but not by any means of its substance: hence 'pseudo-historical' is a term that is applied to it.

In this work the history of the Britons was followed through more than nineteen hundred years, and the life of King Arthur constitutes no more than a quarter of its length. 'One of the world's most brazen and successful frauds', it was called by the eminent scholar R.S. Loomis (*The Development of Arthurian Romance*, 1963). Yet he wrote also in the same place:

The more one studies the *History of the Kings of Britain* and the methods of its composition, the more one is astonished at the author's impudence, and the more one is impressed with his cleverness, his art. Written in a polished but not ornate style, displaying sufficient harmony with learned authorities and accepted traditions, free from the wilder extravagances of the *conteurs*, founded ostensibly on a very ancient manuscript, no wonder Geoffrey's *magnum opus* disarmed scepticism and was welcomed by the learned world.

Its success and its long acceptance was a literary phenomenon of the most extraordinary nature. Of my father's own estimation of the work I have no knowledge. No doubt he would have accepted the judgement of his friend R.W. Chambers, who wrote of it that it was 'one of the most influential books ever written in this country'. He might well have been in sympathy with C.S. Lewis when he roundly condemned the Arthurian part of the work, in a posthumously published essay *The Genesis of a Medieval Book* (*Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, 1966):

Geoffrey is of course important for the historians of the Arthurian Legend; but since the interest of those historians has seldom lain chiefly in literature, they have not always remembered to tell us that he is an author of mediocre talent and no taste. In the Arthurian parts of his work the lion's share falls to the insufferable rigmarole of Merlin's prophecies and to the foreign conquests of Arthur. These latter are, of course, at once the least historical and the least mythical thing about Arthur. If there was a real Arthur he did not conquer Rome. If the story has roots in Celtic paganism, this campaign is not one of them. It is fiction. And what fiction! We can suspend our disbelief in an occasional giant or enchantress. They have friends in our subconscious and in our earliest memories; imagination can easily suppose that the real world has room for them. But vast military operations scrawled over the whole map of Europe and excluded by all the history we know are a different matter. We cannot suspend our disbelief. We don't even want to. The annals of senseless and monotonously successful aggression are dreary enough reading even when true; when blatantly, stupidly false, they are unendurable.

But from the first lines of *The Fall of Arthur* it is seen that my father was departing radically from the story of Arthur's last campaign overseas as told by Geoffrey of Monmouth and his successors. I give here a very condensed account of Geoffrey's narrative, without any discussion of such literary and traditional sources as he drew upon, since my object here is primarily to observe how *The Fall of Arthur* stands in relation to the heroic, 'chronicle' tradition initiated by him.

In his story, Arthur, on the death of his father Uther Pendragon crowned King of Britain at the age of fifteen, at once embarked on a campaign to subdue the hated and hateful Saxons, and after a number of battles the last was fought in Somerset, at Bath. Arthur bore his shield Prydwen, on which was painted an image of the Virgin Mary, his sword Caliburn which was forged in the isle of Avalon, and on his head was set a golden helmet with a crest carved in the form of a dragon. In this battle Arthur drove into the Saxon ranks, and slew with a single blow every man that he struck with Caliburn, until no less than four hundred and seventy Saxons lay dead from his hand alone.

The Saxons having fled into hiding in forests, caves and mountains, Arthur turned to the crushing of the invading Picts and Scots; and 'when he had restored the whole of the country of Britain to its ancient dignity' he married Guinevere, 'born of a noble Roman family', most beautiful of all the women of Britain. In the following year he conquered Ireland and Iceland, and the kings of Gotland and the Orkneys accepted his overlordship without a blow struck. After the passage of twelve more years Norway and Denmark were savagely put by the Britons to fire and sword and subdued to the rule of King Arthur; and all the regions of Gaul were subjected to him.

As Geoffrey of Monmouth represented him, he was now a very mighty monarch, unbeaten in battle, a name of awe throughout Europe, his knights and his household the model and pattern of chivalry and courtly life; and returning from Gaul he held in the city of Caerleon-upon-Usk in Glamorgan a high court and festival of extraordinary magnificence, from which no ruler of renown in the western lands and isles was absent. [But before it ended](#) there appeared envoys from Rome bearing a letter to Arthur from the Emperor Lucius Hiberius. In this letter Lucius demanded that Arthur should himself come to Rome to submit to judgement and punishment for the wrongs he had committed in the withholding of the tribute owing from Britain, and the seizure of lands that were tributary to the Empire; and if he did not come then Rome would move against him.

To this Arthur replied that he would indeed come to Rome, but in order to exact from the Romans the penalty that they had demanded of him. Then Lucius commanded the kings of the East to prepare their armies and to accompany him to the conquest of Britain; and the number of men in this mighty force of arms was precisely four hundred thousand and one hundred and sixty. Against them King Arthur raised a great host, and he placed the defence of Britain in his absence in the hands of his nephew Mordred and of Guinevere the Queen.

Condensing Geoffrey of Monmouth's narrative still further, and letting C.S. Lewis's words stand in place of a précis, the end of the 'Roman War' was a great victory for the Britons and the death of the Emperor Lucius; and Arthur was already in the Alps on his way to Rome when word reached him that [Mordred had usurped](#) the crown and was living adulterously with Guinevere. Here Geoffrey of Monmouth fell suddenly silent: of this matter he will say nothing, he wrote. He was as good as his word; and after the landing of King Arthur at Richborough on the coast of Kent he moved rapidly through battles with Mordred, in which Mordred and Gawain were slain and Arthur mortally wounded. Of Guinevere he said nothing save that in despair she fled to Caerleon and there became a nun; and of Arthur only [that he was](#) borne to the Isle of Avalon for the treating of his wounds. Of Sir Lancelot there is no mention at all in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*.

[This was the story](#), in the 'chronicle' or 'pseudo-historical' tradition of King Arthur deriving from Geoffrey of Monmouth: in the *Roman de Brut* of the Norman poet Wace which appeared at the time of Geoffrey's death (1155), and [in the next generation](#) the very long poem named *Brut* composed near the beginning of the thirteenth century by the Englishman Lazamon, priest of the parish of Emleye (Arley Regis) on the Severn in Worcestershire, following Wace but independently.

*

The alliterative Morte Arthure

It was also the story in a work of some importance, as will be seen later, in the narrative of *The Fall of Arthur*. This is a remarkable poem of the fourteenth century 'alliterative revival' commonly known as the *alliterative Morte Arthure*. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo* (1975) I cited my father's words concerning

the ancient English measure which had descended from antiquity, that kind of verse which is now called 'alliterative'. It aimed at quite different effects from those achieved by the rhymed and syllable-counting metres derived from France and Italy; it seemed harsh and stiff and rugged to those unaccustomed to it. And quite apart from the (from a London point of view) dialectal character of the language, this 'alliterative' verse included in its tradition a number of special verse words, never used in ordinary talk or prose, that were 'dark' to those outside the tradition.

In short, this poet [the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*] adhered to what is now known as the Alliterative Revival of the fourteenth century, the attempt to use the old native metre and style long rusticated for high and serious writing; and he paid the penalty for its failure, for alliterative verse was not in the event revived. The tides of time, of taste, of language, not to mention political power, trade and wealth, were against it.

The alliterative *Morte Arthure* is a long poem of over 4000 lines, of very uncertain date but commonly ascribed to the latter part of the fourteenth century, and known only from a manuscript, made by Robert Thornton, in the library of Lincoln Cathedral.² The sources of the unknown poet have been much debated, but for this purpose it is sufficient to say that in its narrative structure it derives from the *Historia Regum*

Britanniae tradition. It begins with the great feast held by King Arthur to which came the envoys sent by ‘Sir Lucius Iberius, the Emperour of Rome’, and for much of its length it is devoted to description of Arthur’s war against the Romans and their allies. It is indeed a ‘heroic’ poem, a *chanson de geste*, a poem of war (if by no means exclusively), of battlefields and ferocious encounters, the horrors of the sword seen with stark clarity—scenes of the Hundred Years War. A brief passage may illustrate this. Whereas Geoffrey of Monmouth told that Lucius was slain by a knight unknown, in this poem he dies at Arthur’s hand, and the King’s prowess is thus described:

[The emperour thane egerly](#), at Arthure he strykez,
Awkwarde on the umbrere, and egerly hym hittez!
The nakyde swerd at the nese noyes hym sare,
The blode of [the] bolde kynge over the breste rynnys,
Bebled al the brode schelde and the bryghte mayles!
Oure bolde kynge bowes the blonke by the bryghte brydylle,
With his burlyche brande a buffette hym reches,
Thourghe the brene and the breste with his bryghte wapyne,
O-slante doune fro the slote he slyttes at ones!
Thus endys the emperour of Arthure hondes ...[3](#)

After the death of the Emperor in the last great battle of the war against the Romans the alliterative *Morte Arthure* extends for many hundreds of lines in accounts of further aggressive campaigns led by Arthur, not found in Geoffrey of Monmouth, until we find the King north of Rome in the vale of Viterbo ‘among the vines’, and ‘was never meriere men made on this erthe’.

To Arthur in this very agreeable place there came envoys from Rome to sue for peace, among them the ‘konyngeste cardynalle that to the courte lengede’ [belonged], who brought a proposal that the Pope should crown him in Rome as sovereign and lord. King Arthur now gloried in the splendour of his success, and saying that Rome is now ours, and that he will be crowned there at Christmas, he took himself, being weary from lack of sleep, to bed.

But be ane aftyre mydnyghte alle his mode changede;
He mett in the morne-while fulle mervaylous dremes!
And when his dredefulle drem was drefene to the ende,
The kynge dares for dowte, dye as he scholde;
Sendes aftyre phylosophers, and his affraye telles.[4](#)

I have said that the alliterative *Morte Arthure* is a heroic poem celebrating Arthur, above all a poem of battles; but when it is far advanced one becomes aware that it was only with Arthur’s dream amid the vineyards of the valley of Viterbo that the author’s large design was to be fulfilled. That dream, as he described it to his ‘philosophers’ when he awoke in fear, was an elaborate and ornate vision of the Wheel of Fortune, on which are set eight of the ‘Nine Worthies’ or ‘Nine Heroes’, the great rulers and conquerors of history: of this I give here a very abbreviated account.

He dreamed that he was alone and lost in a forest full of wolves and wild boars, and lions that lapped up the blood of his faithful knights; but fleeing away he found himself in a mountain meadow, ‘the meryeste of medillerthe that men myghte beholde’, and saw descending out of the clouds a goddess in magnificent garments, the embodiment of Fortune, bearing in her hands a wheel made of gold and silver which she whirled about in her white hands. Arthur saw that there was ‘a chayere of chalke-whyte silver’ at the top of Fortune’s Wheel, from which six kings had fallen and now clung with broken crowns to the outer circle of the wheel, each in turn lamenting that he had fallen from such heights of greatness and power; and two kings were climbing up to claim the high seat at the summit of the wheel. The lady Fortune now raised Arthur to that seat, telling him that it was through her that he had won all his honour in war, that she had chosen him to sit in the high chair, and treating him as ‘soverayne in erthe’. But suddenly ‘at midday’ her manner changed towards him, saying ‘Thow has lyffede in delytte and lordchippes inewe’ [enough], and ‘abowte scho whirles the whele, and whirles me undire’, so that all his body was crushed; and he awoke.

The philosopher who interpreted his dream told him in hard words that he was at the high point of his fortune, and now must fall from it.

Thow has schedde myche blode, and schalkes distroyede,
Sakeles, in cirquytrie, in sere kynges landis;
Schryfe the of thy schame, and schape for thyne ende!
Thow has a schewynge, sir kynge, take kepe yif the lyke,
For thow sall fersely falle within fyve wynters![5](#)

And having expounded at length the meaning of what King Arthur had seen in his sleep, the learned man declared that the wild beasts in the wood were wicked men that had entered his land to harass his people, and warned him that within ten days he would hear tidings that some mischief had befallen in Britain since his departure. He called on the king to repent his unjust deeds, to 'amend his mood' (that is, to change his disposition) and meekly ask for mercy ere misfortune befall him.

[Then Arthur arose](#) and having dressed (seven lines are devoted to a close description of his magnificent attire) set off to walk alone; and at sunrise he met with a man in the humble clothes (to which as many lines are devoted) that marked him as a pilgrim, on his way to Rome. Accosting him Arthur learned that he was Sir Cradoc, and known to him as 'a knight of his chamber, the keeper of Caerleon'. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's story it is not told how Arthur heard of the treachery of Mordred, but in the poem it was the express purpose of Sir Cradoc's journey (and it was Sir Cradoc who brought the news in *The Fall of Arthur*, [L145](#)). [He told that Mordred](#) had crowned himself King of Britain, taken castles, [prepared a great fleet](#) lying off Southampton, brought in Danes and Saxons, Picts and Saracens to rule the realm, and worst of all his deeds [had wedded Guinevere](#) and begotten a child.

From this point the narrative of the alliterative *Morte Arthur* continues for some eight hundred lines. To this, and its relation to *The Fall of Arthur*, I will return ([see here](#)).

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[It is a notable](#) feature of English Arthurian history that Sir Thomas Malory's fifth book (in Caxton's numbering), *The Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor Himself*, was very closely based on the alliterative *Morte Arthure* (and on no other source): he had the manuscript before him as he made his very judicious prose rendering (but he had access to a manuscript more authentic in detail than that at Lincoln written by Robert Thornton).

[Professor Eugène Vinaver](#), in his great edition (*The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, three volumes, 1947), showed that this tale was actually the first that Malory wrote, and he argued that 'contrary to the generally accepted view, he first became familiar with the Arthurian legend not through "French books" but through an English poem, the alliterative *Morte Arthure*' (Vinaver, I, xli).

With well over a thousand lines of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* still to go, Malory nevertheless abruptly abandoned it, at the point where Arthur, encamped near Viterbo, received the Roman envoys who came seeking peace, with the offer of coronation by the Pope. From here Malory sped rapidly to the end of his tale. Arthur was duly crowned as Emperor, and soon afterwards he returned to Britain. He landed at Sandwich on the coast of Kent, and 'whan quene Guenyvere herde of his commynge she mette with hym at London'. At the beginning of the tale Malory omitted all reference to Arthur's appointment of his nephew Mordred as regent in his absence; and now at its end he rejected the entire story of Mordred's treachery, Guinevere's adultery, and Arthur's downfall. With it of course went the dream of the Wheel of Fortune. When he wrote this tale Malory had no interest in the representation of the tale of King Arthur as the tragedy of an overweening hero.

[It will be seen](#) that in the first canto of *The Fall of Arthur* my father was preserving the essential narrative idea of the 'chronicle' or 'pseudo-historical' tradition, the great expedition of King Arthur eastwards over the sea. But his poem enters at once *in medias res*, without any introductory setting or immediate motive:

Arthur eastward in arms purposed
his war to wage on the wild marches,

for

So fate fell-woven forward drave him.

The great feast, going back to Geoffrey of Monmouth, held at Caerleon to celebrate Arthur's victories, is absent, and with it the coming of the Roman envoys with the menacing letter from the Emperor, which provided the motive for the last campaign of the King of the Britons. In *The Fall of Arthur* there is no trace of this conception. So far from being the zenith of his life's attainment as the conqueror who beat down the Roman armies and had Rome's emissaries begging for peace, his purpose was to 'ward off ruin from the Roman realm' ([L4](#)).

The aims and extent of the campaign are in fact somewhat obscure. At first it is clear that Arthur's intent was to assail the Saxon pirates in their own lairs, and it seems reasonable to suppose therefore that 'the Roman realm' which he will defend against them must surely be the realm of Roman Britain; [but a larger](#) horizon seems to me to be suggested by the references to Mirkwood ([L68](#), [132](#)). I cannot say whether my father intended a more precise meaning in his use of this ancient legendary name for a dark boundary forest

separating peoples, but since Arthur's host marched 'from the mouths of the Rhine / o'er many kingdoms' (I.43), and rode 'ever east and onward' (I.62), and since the forest of Mirkwood lay 'on the houseless hills ever higher mounting / vast, unvanquished' (I.70-1) it seems that they were now far to the east of the regions of Saxon settlement; and this is strongly borne out by Sir Cradoc's words (I.153-4): 'While war ye wage on the wild peoples / in the homeless East ...'

It is also remarkable that in the hundred lines of the first Canto of the poem from the beginning of Arthur's expedition at line 39 to the coming of Sir Cradoc with his evil tidings there is (beside 'Foes before them, flames behind them', I.61) only one reference to the destruction of heathen habitations by the invading host (I.41-3):

Halls and temples of the heathen kings
his might assailed marching in conquest
from the mouths of the Rhine o'er many kingdoms.

My father seems intent rather on conveying a hostile and wintry world of storms and ice, of 'ravens croaking among ruinous rocks', unpeopled save by 'phantom foes with fell voices' and wolves howling, a menacing world in which (I.134-6)

Fear clutched their souls,
waiting watchful in a world of shadow
for woe they knew not, no word speaking.

Moreover, this sense of vast impending danger accompanies the assertions of the poet that the declared purpose of Arthur is a matter of the gravest consequence, a great heroic gamble against fate:

Thus the tides of time to turn backward
and the heathen to humble, his hope urged him (I.5-6)

– echoed in lines I.176-9, after receiving the news of Mordred's treachery:

Now from hope's summit headlong falling
his heart foreboded that his house was doomed,
the ancient world to its end falling
and the tides of time turned against him.

So also, Gawain leading the host 'as in last sortie from leaguered city' is

defence and fortress of a falling world. (I.55)

And later (II.147-9) Mordred knows that

Time is changing;
the West waning, a wind rising
in the waxing East. The world falters.

It is surely the fall of Rome and Roman Christendom that they see approaching in 'the tides of time'.

But however these aspects of *The Fall of Arthur* are interpreted, it is clear that Arthur's great expedition to the Continent, while as equally without root in history as the assault on Roman power of Geoffrey of Monmouth and his successors, is set more nearly within the historical circumstances from which the Arthurian legend arose: the struggle of the Britons in the fifth century against the Germanic invaders. In *The Fall of Arthur* the mark of the enemy is that he is heathen. This is the fate of the Frisian sea-captain who brought to Mordred the news of Arthur's return to Britain (II.89-93):

Radbod the red, rover fearless,
heathen-hearted to hate faithful,
died as his doom was. Dark was the morning.
To sea they cast him, of his soul recked not
that walks in the waters, wandering homeless.

He 'passed to hell' (II.67). Thus the heathen barbarians are dispatched to inevitable perdition in the metre that the barbarians brought to the conquered lands. *Wild blow the winds of war in Britain!* says Sir Cradoc, when telling King Arthur (I.160) of the heathen dragon ships driving in on the unguarded shores; and five centuries later Torhthelm, in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*, repeats his words with reference to the Norsemen:

So the last is fallen of the line of earls,
from Saxon lords long-descended,
who sailed the seas, as songs tell us,
from Angel in the east, with eager swords
upon war's anvil the Welsh smiting.
Realms here they won and royal kingdoms,
and in olden days this isle conquered.
And now from the North need comes again:
wild blows the wind of war to Britain!

A distinctive feature of the first canto of *The Fall of Arthur* concerns Mordred, who at the very outset of the narrative is portrayed as in his 'malice' sustaining King Arthur in his resolve to carry war into the lands of the barbarous peoples, for a hidden purpose lay beneath his words (1.27–9):

And Britain the blessed, thy broad kingdom,
I will hold unharmed till thy home-coming.
Faithful hast thou found me.

Where Geoffrey of Monmouth devoted no more than a single sentence to the matter ('He made over the task of defending Britain to his nephew Mordred and his Queen Guinevere'), in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* the king is remarkably long-winded in his exposition of the burden—and Mordred begs (unsuccessfully) to be excused from it and to be allowed to accompany Arthur to the war. There is no hint of what is to come. In *The Fall of Arthur* it is said that Sir Gawain had no inkling of 'guile or treason' in Mordred's 'bold counsel', for (I.36–8)

he was for battle eager,
in idle ease the evil seeing
that had rent asunder the Round Table.

[With these words](#) my father introduced an element into the narrative that sets it altogether apart from works in the ‘chronicle’ tradition. A few lines later ([L44–5](#)) it is said that Lancelot and other knights were not with Arthur in his campaign, and later in the first Canto, after he had heard the news of Mordred’s treason from Sir Cradoc, King Arthur consulted with Sir Gawain ([L180](#)) and told him how greatly he missed Sir Lancelot and ‘the mighty swords of Ban’s kindred’, and thought it the wisest course to send to Lancelot’s people and ask their aid. From this Sir Gawain sternly dissented.

None of this is comprehensible as it stands, and it may well be that my father anticipated some familiarity on the reader's part with the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. The causes of the estrangement between Arthur and Lancelot do indeed appear in the third canto of the poem, but in a very oblique fashion.

It would lie far outside my intention here to enter into any account of the 'strains' or 'streams' of mediaeval Arthurian legend, the 'pseudo-historical' or 'chronicle' tradition on the one hand, and the vast 'romantic' development of the 'Matter of Britain' in French prose and poetry. I am concerned solely to indicate the characteristics of my father's treatment of the legend of Lancelot and Guinevere.

I have noticed already that in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* there is no mention whatever of Sir Lancelot. In the alliterative *Morte Arthure* he does appear several times, but in almost every case he is named merely as one among the chief knights of the Round Table.⁶ Of his appearance in Malory's *Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor Himself* (see [here](#)) Professor Vinaver observed:

Malory's account gives the impression that Lancelot is nothing but a warrior, and that all his great qualities of mind and heart are to be placed for ever in the service of his king. No reader [of Malory's Tale] would gather from it that Lancelot had been from the very beginning a courtly hero, that he had first appeared in medieval romance as a champion of *courtoisie*, and that it was as the protagonist of Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte de la Charette*² that he had won his world-wide fame. It was because Lancelot had only been known as a courtly knight that he had had so few attractions for earlier English writers: they had found little in him to support and illustrate their epic treatment of Arthurian romance. The author of the [alliterative] *Morte Arthure*, no doubt for this very reason, had relegated Lancelot to comparative insignificance. Malory's attitude was at first much the same: his mind, like that of his English predecessors, dwelled on problems of human heroism, not on the subtle issues of courtly behaviour. And in order to restore Lancelot to fame he made him into a genuine epic hero, more akin to the Gawain of the *Morte Arthure* than to Chrétien's 'knight of the cart'. We do not know how much of the French tradition was directly accessible to him when he wrote his *Tale of Arthur and Lucius*. What is certain is that he was then primarily an epic writer, unwilling and perhaps even

unable to follow the romanticized knight-errantry and understand its fascination. The great adventure of the French books had not yet begun.

Of Lancelot in *The Fall of Arthur*, introduced in so allusive a way, it can be said at once that he is no fantastic figure out of 'romanticized knight-errantry'; and the source of the story that he was introducing is not doubtful. [In the French romance](#) in prose entitled the *Mort Artu*, the theme of the adulterous love of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere was combined with that of the treason of Mordred and the fall of King Arthur. The *Mort Artu* was the source for an English poem of the fourteenth century named *Le Morte Arthur*, commonly referred to as the *stanzaic Morte Arthur* (to distinguish it from the *alliterative Morte Arthure*), a long poem of nearly 4000 lines composed in eight-line stanzas. Sir Thomas Malory made use of both the *Mort Artu* and the English poem, closely consulting and comparing them to provide the narrative structure on which he founded his last book, *The Morte Arthur* properly so called.[8](#)

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The stanzaic Morte Arthur and Malory's Tale of the Death of Arthur

I shall here recount Malory's narrative in brief, but before doing so I will cite a few stanzas of the English poem from the beginning of the final tragedy to give some indication of its manner and form.

A tyme befelle, sothe to sayne,
The knyghtis stode in chambyr and spake,
Both Gaheriet, and syr Gawayne,
And Mordreite, that mykelle couthe of wrake;
'Allas,' than sayde syr Agrawayne,
'How fals men schalle we us make,
And how longe shalle we hele and layne
The treson of Launcelote du Lake!

Wele we wote, wythouten wene,
The kynge Arthur oure eme sholde be,
And Launcelote lyes by the quene;
Ageyne the kynge trator is he,
And that wote alle the curte bydene,
And iche day it here and see:
To the kynge we shulde it mene,
Yif ye wille do by the counselle of me.'

'Wele wote we,' sayd sir Gawayne,
'That we are of the kyngis kynne,
And Launcelot is so mykylle of mayne,
That suche wordys were better blynne;
Welle wote thou, brothyr Agrawayne,
Thereof shulde we bot harmys wyne;
Yit were it better to hele and layne,
Than werre and wrake thus to begynne.'[9](#)

[The first scene](#), the matter of these stanzas, is thus introduced by Malory:

hit befelle in the moneth of May a grete angur and unhappy [*disastrous*] that stynted nat tylle the floure of chyvalry of the worlde was destroyed and slayne. And all was longe uppon [*due to*] two unhappy [*pernicious*] knyghtis whych were named sir Aggravayne and sir Mordred, that were brethirn unto sir Gawayne. For thys sir Aggravayne and sir Mordred had ever a prevy hate unto the quene, dame Gwenyver, and to sir Launcelot; and dayly and nyghtly they ever wacched uppon sir Launcelot.

[It happened that Gawain](#) and his brothers Agravain, [Gareth, and Gaheris](#) (the sons of Arthur's sister Morgause and king Lot of Lothian), and also Mordred (who in the tradition followed by Malory was the son by unwitting incest of Arthur and Morgause¹⁰), met together in King Arthur's chamber. Agravain declared that it was known to everyone 'how sir Launcelot lyeth dayly and nyghtly by the quene', and that he intended to inform on Lancelot to the king. To this Gawain, being himself devoted to Lancelot, most illustrious of the knights of the Round Table, was profoundly opposed, foreseeing the likelihood of disastrous strife, as were his brothers Gareth and Gaheris also; and after blunt words they left the chamber as King Arthur entered, demanding to know what was toward. And when Agravain told him, he was greatly troubled, for although he

had a suspicion of the truth he had no wish to pursue the matter against so great a man as Lancelot. He said therefore that he would do nothing without the proof that could only be had if Lancelot were taken in the act.

To this end Agravain proposed the setting of a trap. The king should ride out hunting on the next day, and he should send word to the queen that he would not return that night. Then Agravain and Mordred and twelve other knights would go to her chamber and bring back Lancelot alive or dead. But this did not befall. When Lancelot was with the queen the fourteen knights came to the door and with high words Agravain and Mordred called him out as a traitor; but Lancelot was wholly without armour and weapons, and he and the queen were in great distress. Then Lancelot unbarred the chamber-door and opened it only so far as to let one man pass through; and when Sir Colgrevice did so and struck at him with his sword Lancelot felled him with a single blow. Then he put on the dead man's armour, and striding out among the other knights he slew without hurt to himself all of them, including two sons of Gawain and his brother Agravain, save Mordred, who was wounded and fled away.

When the king learned of all this from Mordred he foresaw that the fellowship of the Round Table was broken for ever, for many knights would hold with Lancelot; but Guinevere must 'have the law', and he commanded that the queen be taken to the fire and there to be burnt. Gawain ardently urged Arthur to be less hasty in passing this judgement, pleading the possibility that Lancelot had gone to the queen in all innocence, but the king was adamant. He said that if he laid hands on Lancelot he should die as shameful a death, and why should this trouble Sir Gawain since he had slain his brother and his sons? To this Gawain replied that he had warned them of their peril, and that they had brought about their own deaths. But the king was unmoved, and ordered Gawain with his brothers Gareth and Gaheris to put on their armour and bring the queen to the fire. Gawain refused the command of King Arthur. Then let Sir Gareth and Sir Gaheris be present, said the king. They were unable to refuse, but said that they would go to the burning greatly against their will, and that they would wear no armour. Then Gawain wept bitterly, and said 'Alas, that ever I shulde endure to se this wofull day!'

Now Lancelot with a great number of armed knights, who supported him and his determination to rescue the queen if she were condemned, were waiting in a wood at no great distance, and when it was reported that the queen was about to die they raced to the place of the burning and a fierce battle arose. Lancelot hewing to right and left at all who withstood him smote two men who were 'unarmed and unwares' and 'he saw them nat'; but they were Gawain's brothers Gareth and Gaheris, and Gawain had extraordinary devotion to Gareth, as did Gareth to Lancelot.

Lancelot went to Guinevere where she stood, and setting her on his horse he rode with her to his castle of Joyous Garde, and they remained there. King Arthur fell into an extremity of grief at these events. He ordered that no one should tell Gawain:

'for I am sure,' seyde the kynge, 'whan he hyryth telle that sir Gareth is dede he wyll go nygh oute of hys mynde'.
'Merci Jesu,' seyde the kynge, 'why slew he sir Gaherys and sir Gareth? For I dare sey, as for sir Gareth, he loved sir Launcelot of all men erthly.'

The death of his brothers, said the king, will cause the greatest mortal war that ever was. For Gawain of course soon learned of it; and he was changed in a short space from Lancelot's devoted friend to his implacable foe. In the words of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* he cried out:

Betwixte me and Launcelote du Lake
Nys man in erthe, for sothe to sayne,
Shall trewes sette and pees make
Er outhur of vs haue other slayne.

Or as he said to the king in Malory's tale: 'For I promyse unto God, for the deth of my brothir Sir Gareth, I shall seke sir Launcelot thorowoute seven kynges realmys, but I shall sle hym, other ellis he shall sle me.'

[To which King Arthur](#) replied: 'Sir, ye shall nat nede to seke hym so far, for as I here say, sir Launcelot woll abyde me and us all wythin the castell of Joyous Garde.'

Then the king with Sir Gawain at the head of a great host laid siege to Joyous Garde. Much time passed before Sir Lancelot would issue from the castle with his knights, but at last he appeared on the walls and spoke to Arthur and Gawain below, replying to their verbal assault in conciliatory words, seeking to avoid conflict of arms with them, and most especially with the king. He spoke of the many dangers that he had rescued them from, asserted his wholly unwitting slaying of Sir Gareth and Sir Gaheris, the perfect innocence of Guinevere, and the rightness of his rescue of her from the burning. But all this was to no avail, and a great battle arose at Joyous Garde, in which Lancelot went so far in his refusal to return the attempted blows of King Arthur, who

was 'ever about sir Launcelot to have slain him', that he raised him up when he had been unhorsed by Sir Bors de Ganis and set him on his horse again.

After two days of fierce fighting, in which Gawain was wounded, the hosts separated, that of Sir Lancelot being now in the ascendant; and at this time there came to King Arthur an envoy from Rome bearing an edict of the Pope, charging him that on pain of an interdict on all England he must receive back the queen and come to an accorde with Sir Lancelot.

Lancelot did all in his power to further the Papal demand. He brought back Guinevere to the king; but against the coldly implacable hatred of Gawain he could not prevail. The end of it was banishment, and he departed from the court in bitterness, saying, in Malory's tale:

Most nobelyst Crysten realme, whom I have loved aboven all other realmys! And in the I have gotyn a grete parte of my worshyp [*honour*], and now that I shall departe in thys wyse, truly me repentis that ever I cam in thys realme, that I shulde be thus shamefully banysshed, undeserved and causeles! But fortune is so varyaunte, and the wheele so mutable, that there ys no constaunte abydyng.

But Gawain said:

Wyte thou well we shall sone com afir, and breke the strengyst castell that thou hast, uppon thy hede!

In the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* Lancelot asked that he should be safe from pursuit in his own lands in France, but:

Syr Gawayne than sayd, 'naye,
By hym that made sonne and mone,
Dight the as welle as euyr thou may,
For we shalle after come fulle sone.'

Then Lancelot said farewell to Guinevere and he kissed her, and then he said 'all opynly':

'Now lat se whatsomever he be in thys place that dare say the queen ys nat trew unto my lorde Arthur, lat se who woll speke and [*if*] he dare speke.' And therewith he brought the quene to the kyng, and than sir Launcelot toke hys leve and departed. ...

[And so he toke his way to Joyous Garde](#), and than ever afftir he called hit the 'Dolorous Garde'. And thus departed sir Launcelot frome the courte for ever.

Then he gathered many knights about him and they took ship for France.

[Sir Lancelot was](#) the [son of King Ban](#), who ruled over a city and a realm in France named, both in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and in Malory, *Benwick*; in the *Mort Artu* it is *Benoic*. Some of the Knights of the Round Table were close kin of Lancelot, among them Sir Ector de Maris (his brother), Sir Lionel, Sir Bors de Ganis, and Sir Blamore de Ganis (these knights are named in *The Fall of Arthur*, [1.44–5](#), and again in [III.131–2](#)). Thus the destination of these exiles was Benwick; but where it was thought to be has not, to my knowledge, been discovered. Malory said at this point in his tale that they 'sayled unto Benwyke: som men calle hit Bayan and some men calle hit Beawme, where the wyne of Beawme ys.' But no such identification is made elsewhere; and since Benwick is clearly a port, it cannot be Beaune, which is many hundreds of miles from the Atlantic; while if *Bayan* is Bayonne, that is very far to the south.

But wherever Benwick was, it was not long before King Arthur and Sir Gawain, the leading spirit in the enterprise, carried out his threat. The king 'made sir Mordred chyeff ruler of all Ingelonde, and also he put the quene undir hys governunace', and with a great host they crossed the sea, and began to burn and lay waste Sir Lancelot's lands. Still striving for peace, despite the opinion among his knights that 'youre curtesy woll shende [*ruin*] us all', Lancelot sent to King Arthur, but again received the response, that the king 'wolde accorde with sir Launcelot, but sir Gawayne woll nat suffir hym'. Then at the gate of the besieged town of Benwick Gawain appeared and cried out a challenge to the defenders. Sir Bors and then Sir Lionel rode against him, but both were badly worsted and hurt, and so it went on until at last and reluctantly Lancelot took up the challenge.

[In all the accounts](#) of this war Sir Gawain is credited with the possession of a very singular 'grace', a faculty whereby his strength greatly increased towards noon and then again declined. When Lancelot perceived that this was so he dodged to and fro and avoided Gawain's thrusts for a long time until his miraculous strength began to wane, whereupon Lancelot fell on him and gave him a great wound. (Incidentally the *Mort Artu* tells the story that during the time of Gawain's recovery Arthur left the siege of Benwick and conducted his Roman campaign, in which the Emperor Lucius was slain; Malory of course ignored this, since he had already told the story in his tale of Arthur and the Emperor Lucius, [see here](#).) But when Gawain was able to fight again all was

repeated a second time with the same outcome, for Lancelot struck him in the place of the former wound. And even yet Gawain's hatred was unappeased, but as he prepared for a third attempt news came from England that led Arthur to raise the siege of Benwick and return. That news was that Mordred had claimed to have received letters telling that Arthur had been slain in battle by Lancelot; that he had 'made a parlemente', and had had himself crowned king at Canterbury; and that [he had declared that he would wed Guinevere](#), naming the day and preparing the bridal feast.

To Mordred Guinevere masked her intention, but fled to London and took refuge from him in the Tower; and though he attacked it he could not take it, and there she remained. But now Arthur with [a great navy was approaching Dover](#), and there was Mordred awaiting him.

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Thus it had been brought about that while King Arthur's seaborne campaign remained, the precedent history had entirely changed. It was the love of Lancelot and Guinevere that in a long chain of causation brought the king's departure from England (not 'Britain') to pass: from the intrusion of Agravain and Mordred to the death by burning imposed on Guinevere, from which Lancelot rescued her, but at the cost of his slaying of Gareth and Gaheris, whereby Gawain's love of Lancelot is changed to insane hatred, to the banishment of Lancelot, and so to the expedition of vengeance against him in his lands in France. Congruence between the distinct traditions, exemplified by the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, is only reached when news reaches Arthur overseas of Mordred's usurpation of the kingdom.

It will be seen that in many features the third canto of *The Fall of Arthur* is much at variance, largely by omission, with Malory's *Tale of the Death of Arthur* (as also with the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*). There is no suggestion that Lancelot's killing of Gawain's brothers was the crucial moment in the development of the tragedy; and it is certainly the case that what is vital to the story in the old versions, the relentless hatred felt for Lancelot by Gawain, his former devoted friend, is absent. In Canto III Gawain appears only (lines 29 ff.) in a portrait, expressly juxtaposed, to his advantage, with that of Lancelot which precedes it, and again in a reference ([III.177](#)) to his glory while Lancelot in Benwick 'over leagues of sea / looked and pondered alone musing / doubtful-hearted'. But he plays no part in the narrative until the sea-battle on Arthur's return. It is true that in Canto I Gawain, speaking 'grave and slowly', opposes Arthur's desire to call upon Lancelot and his people for aid against Mordred ([I.190](#)); but it seems that Gawain's dissent arose from doubt of the loyalty of 'Ban's kindred', and the measured tone of his words is far removed from the implacable anger of the Gawain of the old books.

In *The Fall of Arthur* the narrative of events following Guinevere's rescue from the fire is reduced to the words 'far he bore her; / fear fell on men, none would follow after' ([III.84-5](#)); and the entire story of the siege of Joyous Garde by Arthur and Gawain, the fierce fighting there, the intensity of Lancelot's chivalric loyalty to the king, the intervention of the Pope—all this has gone.

The conception, in the retrospective view of Canto III, of the breaking of the fellowship of the Round Table and the complexity of Lancelot's loves and loyalties is thus rendered far simpler. With the absence of Gawain a dimension is removed. The gulf that opened between King Arthur and Sir Lancelot becomes more sharply defined, and is found to be impossible of resolution. This is clearly stated more than once:

He his lord betrayed to love yielding,
and love forsaking lord regained not;
faith was refused him who had faith broken,
by leagues of sea from love sundered.
(III.15-18, repeated without the third line in III.140-2.)

The rescue of Guinevere from the stake remains crucial in *The Fall of Arthur*, but not on account of the slaying of Gareth and Gaheris: rather it is on account of the reckless violence of Lancelot's irruption on the scene, which was followed by a Túrin-like subsidence after a great rage, and led to a far-reaching penitence of spirit and attempt to undo the havoc he had caused, an agonizing recognition of guilt.

His pride he repented, his prowess cursing
that friends had felled, faith had broken. (III.90-1)

Above all, 'Strong oaths they broke' (III.62): he must restore Guinevere to the king, seeking his mercy towards her and his own reacceptance.

Neither in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* nor in Malory's tale is there any reference to Guinevere's thoughts or wishes in the matter. Very different is her treatment in *The Fall of Arthur*, where her desires are analyzed, and where she finds this new Lancelot an unwelcome stranger whose disturbance of mind she cannot comprehend:

‘Strange she deemed him, / by a sudden sickness from his self altered’ (III.95–6). The same words are used of Lancelot: ‘Strange he deemed her / from her self altered’. But Lancelot’s loss was far greater than Guinevere’s; for ‘Though in wrath she left him, no ruth showing, / no pity feeling, proud and scornful, dear he loved her’ (III.166–8). ‘In the courts of Camelot she was queen again, / great and glorious’ (III.113–14); while Lancelot as petitioner was by King Arthur rejected utterly, and banished to his dark reflections in another land. But the king, sad at heart, knew that he had lost the best of all his knights and many with him; and while he lamented this to Gawain when the news of Mordred’s treason reached them ([I.180](#)), Lancelot in Benwick, hearing rumours of approaching war, turned over in his mind conflicting thoughts of Arthur and Guinevere ([III.143](#)).

With the absence of Gawain, the invasion of Benwick which he inspired in vengeance against Lancelot also disappeared in *The Fall of Arthur*. We do not see Arthur again until Canto IV, when Mordred on the sea-cliffs hears the cry of ‘A sail, a sail on the sea shining!’ ([IV.117](#)). But before the ‘Lancelot story’ enters in retrospective form in Canto III there is the wholly original Canto II, in which is told how the dying captain of a ship wrecked on the coast, a heathen sea-rover named Radbod in the pay of Mordred, reported to him that Sir Cradoc (as told in Canto I) had slipped out of Britain and followed the trail of King Arthur to warn him of the designs of Mordred against him; already Arthur was hastening back to Britain. With his last breath Radbod gave Mordred a tense account of the feverish preparations of warriors and ships ([II.76–89](#)).

But the most remarkable aspect of Canto II of *The Fall of Arthur* is the emergence of Mordred as a fully imagined figure in the approaching calamity.

In Canto I no more has been told of him than that his vigorous support of Arthur’s eastward campaign veiled a secret and evil purpose which is now revealed. Guinevere has not been named. Of his association with the queen Geoffrey of Monmouth had said only ([see here](#)) that after his victory over the Romans news reached King Arthur that she was living adulterously with Mordred. In the alliterative *Morte Arthure* ([see here](#)) Sir Cradoc told the king that ‘worst of all Mordred’s deeds he had wedded Guinevere and begotten a child’. In Malory’s version of the story ([see here](#)) the news that reached Arthur at Benwick was that Mordred had declared that he would wed Guinevere. In full Malory’s text reads:

And so he made redy for the feste, and a day prefyxe that they shulde be wedded; wherefore quene Gwenyver was passyng hevvy. But she durst nat discover her harte, but spake fayre, and agreed to sir Mordredys wyll. And anone she desyred of sir Mordred to go to London to byghe [*buy*] all maner thynges that longed to the brydale. And bycause of her fayre speche sir Mordred trusted her and gaff her leve; and so whan she cam to London she toke the Towre of London, and suddeynly in all haste possyble she stuffed hit with all maner of vytayle, and wel garnysshed hit with men, and so kepte hit.

In Canto I of *The Fall of Arthur* Sir Cradoc says nothing of Guinevere; but in Canto II before Radbod the ship’s captain had delivered his tidings Mordred is seen looking out from a high window indifferent to the storm in which the ship foundered ([II.18–31](#)), for his mind was wholly absorbed in his desire for Guinevere; and when he had heard what Radbod had to tell, and had sent ‘messengers speeding / northward and eastward the news bearing’, he set out for Camelot. Guinevere heard the quick steps of this deeply sinister man as he came up the stair to her bower. At that fateful meeting Mordred offered her a choice that was no choice, between ‘slave or lady, wife or captive’ ([II.154–5](#)). Guinevere asked for time, but he would grant her little enough: ‘twixt bride and bond / brief be the choosing!’ She decided on immediate flight—but not to the Tower of London. She stole away in a dark cloak; and we see next the lights of Camelot fading behind her as she fled westward with a few companions, making for the castle of King Leodogrance, her father.

Canto II ends with her thoughts of Lancelot: would he return? Canto IV begins with a bright morning on the borders of Wales, when the riders sent out by Mordred to hunt her down lose all trace of her.

The queen they hunted with cold hatred,
till their hope failed them amid houseless stones,
halting hungry-eyed under the hills’ menace
at the walls of Wales.

[Then follows the news](#) of their failure delivered to Mordred by his squire Ivor, together with some advice out of season that enraged his master, as he stood in his camp on the coastal cliffs above [Romeril](#) (Romney in Kent), gazing at the empty sea: fearful lest Guinevere had sent a messenger to Lancelot, ‘love recalling / and his aid asking in her evil day’ (IV.95–6). At last the sails of Arthur’s navy were seen.

Here one may look back to see how to this point my father had treated, and transformed, the narrative tradition that came to be known in later times in England from Malory’s last tale, *The Death of Arthur*.

He preserved the 'chronicle' tradition of Arthur's eastern campaign overseas, but totally changed its nature and purpose. Arthur defends 'Rome', he does not assault it.

He retained the treason and usurpation of Mordred and his desire for Guinevere, but in a greatly developed portrait.

He introduced (*in a retrospect*) the 'romance' legend of Lancelot and Guinevere (entirely unknown to the 'chronicle' tradition), but greatly simplified the complex motives, deriving from the French *Mort Artu*, and found in the English stanzaic *Morte Arthur* and in Malory's last tale, by excising Gawain's part. He preserved the sentence of burning passed on Guinevere and her rescue by Lancelot; but his banishment now arose as punishment for his relationship with the queen, and not from Gawain's hatred of him for his slaying of Gareth. Lancelot is banished to Benwick, but Guinevere is restored to Arthur's favour.

The attack on Benwick by Arthur and Gawain was entirely excised, and the news of Mordred's treason reached Arthur not at Benwick but in the distant east.

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Malory's Tale of the Death of Arthur (ii)

I will now sketch the concluding narrative of Malory's last tale, taking it up from where I left it ([see here](#)) with Arthur's ships approaching Dover and Mordred awaiting him. Malory was now quite largely drawing on the English poem, the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, for the detail of the narrative.

Arthur's host fought their way up from the beaches and with much bloodshed routed Mordred's people. But Sir Gawain was found, lying in a boat, 'more than halff dede'; and speaking to King Arthur he declared that through his pride and stubbornness he had caused his own death, for now he had been smitten in the place of the old wound that Lancelot gave him at Benwick; and that it was through him that Arthur suffered this grievous misfortune:

for had that noble knyght, Sir Launcelot, ben with you, as he was and wolde have ben, thys unhappy warre had never ben begunne And now ye shall mysse sir Launcelot. But alas that I wolde nat accorde with hym!

And before he died he called for paper and pen to write a letter to Lancelot beseeching him to return in haste to aid King Arthur against Mordred.

[Gawain was buried](#) in the chapel in Dover Castle. But Mordred retreated to Barham Down in Kent, a few miles from Canterbury, and there Arthur came upon him: this battle ended with Mordred's flight to Canterbury. Arthur then withdrew westward to Salisbury Plain, and the two hosts prepared for a further encounter. But Sir Gawain appeared to Arthur in a dream, saying that he had been sent by God to warn him against further fighting until a month had passed, by which time Sir Lancelot would come from France with all his knights. A treaty was then negotiated with Mordred to this end, but broken by a mistaken fear of treachery; and there followed the third and most savage battle lasting all day till nightfall, and ending with King Arthur and Sir Bedivere and Sir Lucan on the one hand, and Mordred on the other, standing amid vast numbers of slain men. But the king caught sight of Mordred 'leanyng uppon his swerde amonge a grete hepe of dede men'; and racing towards each other Arthur ran Mordred through with his spear. Then Mordred knew that he had got his death wound, but with his last strength 'he smote hys fadir, kynge Arthure, with hys swerde holdyng in both hys hondys, uppon the syde of the hede, that the swerde perced the helmet', and with that Mordred 'daysshed downe starke dede to the erthe'.

Then Sir Bedivere and Sir Lucan, themselves severely wounded, carried the king to 'a lytyll chapell nat farre from the see'. Hearing a great clamour from the battlefield, for robbers had come to pillage the slain, the two knights thought it best to carry the king further off, but as they did so Sir Lucan fell dead from his wounds. Then Arthur ordered Bedivere to take his sword Excalibur, to cast it into '[yondir watirs syde](#)', and returning tell him what he had seen. Twice Bedivere went to the water, and each time he feigned that he had done what he was bidden; but each time King Arthur told him in anger that he lied. For a third time Bedivere went 'unto the watirs syde', and returning told truthfully that he had hurled the sword as far as he could, whereupon an arm had risen from the water, caught the sword and brandished it, and then drew it down and disappeared.

[Then, as the king commanded](#), Bedivere carried him on his back to the water's edge, where 'faste by the banke hoved [*waited*] a lytyll barge with many fayre ladyes in hit, and amonge them all was a quene', she being Arthur's sister, Morgan la Fée. Then Bedivere laid Arthur in the barge, and Morgan said (following the words in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*) 'A, my dere brother! Why have ye taryed so longe from me? Alas, thys wounde on youre hede hath caught overmuch coude!' But as the barge departed Bedivere cried out to the king asking what should become of him; and he answered:

Comforte thyselff, and do as well as thou mayste, for in me ys no truste for to truste in. [For I muste](#) into the vale of Avylyon to hele me of my grevous wounde. And if thou here nevermore of me, pray for my soule!

[Next day, in his wandering](#) Bedivere came upon ‘a chapell and an ermytage’ where there was a newly dug grave, concerning which the hermit told him that ‘a number of ladies’ had come at midnight and brought the body to him for burial (on this matter [see here](#)). Then Bedivere remained at the hermitage, which was ‘besydes Glassyngbyry’ (Glastonbury in Somerset), and lived with the hermit ‘in prayers and fastynges and grete abstynance’. But when Guinevere learned of all that had happened she ‘stole away’ and came to Amysbyry (Amesbury in Wiltshire), and there became a nun:

and never creature coude make her myry, but ever she lyved in fastynge, prayers, and almes-dedis, that all maner of people mervayled how vertuously she was chaunged.

[When Lancelot in Benwick](#) learned of what had come to pass in England, and had received Gawain’s letter, in great haste he made ready a host and crossed the sea to Dover. There he found that he was too late. He visited in great grief the tomb of Gawain in the chapel of Dover Castle, and then he rode away westwards until he came to the convent where Guinevere had become a nun. When she saw him again she fell into a swoon, but recovering she said to the assembled nuns, in the presence of Lancelot:

Thorow thys same man and me hath all thys warre be wrought, and the deth of the moste noblest knyghtes of the worlde; for thorow oure love that we have loved togydir ys my moste noble lorde slayne. Therefore, sir Launcelot, wyte thou well I am sette in suche a plyght to get my soule hele [*healing, health*].

In the words between them, which cannot be shortened or sketched, she remained adamant, refusing him when he said ‘I praye you kysse me, and never no more.’ And so they parted, ‘but there was never so harde an herted man but he wold have wepte to see the dolour that they made, [for there was lamentacyon](#) as they had be stungyn with spersys.’

After Lancelot left Amesbury he came upon the hermitage where Bedivere now lived, and he stayed there, and led the same manner of life. Other knights of the Round Table came to join them there; and after six years Lancelot became a priest. One night he had a vision, in which he was told that he must go to to Amesbury, where he would find Guinevere dead, and that she must be buried by the side of King Arthur. With his companions Lancelot went on foot ‘from Glastynburye to Almysburye, the whiche is lytel more than thirty myle’, but they took two days, for they were weak and feeble from their lives of penance and fasting. When they reached Amesbury they learned that Guinevere had died only half an hour before; and they were told that she had said of Lancelot that

‘hyder he cometh as faste as he may to fetch me, and besyde my lord kyng Arthur he shal berye me.’ Wherefore the quene sayd in heryng of them al, ‘I beseche Almyghty God that I may never have power to see syr Launcelot wyth my worldly eyen!’

And so Guinevere was carried back to the chapel near Glastonbury, and there she was buried.

Thereafter Lancelot would eat and drink so little that ‘he dryed and dwyned awaye’, and before long he died. After a journey of fifteen days his body was brought according to his wish to the castle of [Joyous Garde](#), and was buried in the choir of the chapel there.

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[The alliterative Morte Arthure \(ii\).](#)

From the moment when the sails of Arthur’s fleet were seen from the coast my father turned away from the tradition embodied in English in the stanzaic *Morte Arthure* and Malory’s *Tale of the Death of Arthur* and turned to the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, whose narrative I left at the point where Arthur learned from Sir Cradoc of Mordred’s treachery and his wedding to Guinevere ([see here](#)).

In the stanzaic *Morte Arthure* and in Malory there was no confrontation at sea to Arthur on his return, but in the alliterative poem it was a part of Sir Cradoc’s ill news that Mordred had raised a fleet against him ([see here](#)):

Att Southamptone on the see es seuene skore [s]chippes,
frawghte fulle of ferse folke, owt of ferre landes.

The author conveys in a few lines the speed of the return of Arthur, who

Turnys thorowe Tuskayne, taries bot littill,
Lyghte noghte in Lumbarddye bot when the lyghte failede;
Merkes ouer the mowntaynes full mervaylous wayes ...

‘and within fyftene dayes his flete es assemblede’ (in *The Fall of Arthur*, [II.76–88](#), Radbod gives to Mordred a vivid account of Arthur’s preparations).

[But now in the](#) alliterative *Morte Arthure* the poet devoted some hundred lines to the evocation of a violent sea-battle that followed, to which there is nothing comparable in mediaeval English literature. There is a furious onset of words, conveying (one might say, as much by their form and conjunctions as by their meaning) the roar of the battle, the splitting of timbers, ships crashing together, trumpets blowing, arrows flying, masts falling ...

It was from this poem that my father derived his portrayal of a great sea-battle off the coast of Kent on Arthur’s return. In earlier works of the ‘chronicle’ tradition there was fierce fighting when Arthur’s fleet came in, but it was a battle between invaders from the sea opposed by Mordred’s host defending the cliffs. In *Lazamon’s Brut* ([see here, here](#)) this is made very plain, and that my father had the passage in mind when he wrote of the sea-battle is seen from the words in the *Brut* telling that Arthur ‘hehte [ordered] þat his scip-men brohten hine to Romerel’, whence he took the name Romeril (Romney in Kent, already referred to, [see here](#)).

In the sea-battle in *The Fall of Arthur* there are echoes no doubt of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* in such lines as (IV.180–2)

Beak met bulwark. Burst were timbers.
There was clang of iron and crash of axes;
sparked and splintered spears and helmets ...

but there is no trace, naturally enough, of the triumphant, exultant tone of the old poem, where ‘our’ lords are seen laughing loudly at the foreigners in Mordred’s fleet who leap in terror into the sea (‘when ledys [men] of owtlonndys leppyn in waters, / All oure lordes one lowde laughen at ones’).

It is convenient here to give an account, in some parts more condensed than in others, of the conclusion of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

[The battle of the ships](#) was won, but ‘Yitt es the traytoure one londe with tryede knyghttes’, awaiting the attempt by the incomers to force a landing against them; and from this the king was prevented, for the tide had by now gone out, leaving great slushy pools. [But Gawain took a galley](#) [a large open boat] and with a small band of men came ashore, sinking to his waist in his golden garments (‘to the girdylle he gos in alle his gylte wedys’) and then racing across the sands, where they hurled themselves against the host of Mordred arrayed before them. [Gawain struck down](#) the King of Gothland, and then crying ‘Fy on the, felone, and thy false werkys!’ made for Mordred ‘among all his men, with the Montagues and other great lords’; but he and his band were surrounded and hopelessly outnumbered (‘We are beset by Saracens on all sides!’).

Gawain fell then into a crazed recklessness, as the poet repeatedly declares: ‘all his witte faylede’; ‘alls unwyse, wodewyse’ [as one reckless and mad]; ‘he fell in a fransye for fersenesse of herte’; ‘wode [mad] alls a wylde beste’. Finally in a hand-to-hand encounter with Mordred he was worsted, and fell dead from a blow that pierced his helmet. Mordred was questioned by King Frederic of Friesland, who saw Gawain’s deeds:

Qwat gome was he this with the gaye armes
[With this gryffoune of golde](#), that es one growffe fallyn?¹¹

And Mordred named him, and greatly praised him:

Had thow knawen hym, sir kynge, ‘in kythe thare he lengede,
His konyng, his knyghthode, his kyndly werkes,
His doying, his doughtyness, his dedis of armes,
Thow wolde hafe dole for his dede the dayes of thy lyfe!’
Yit that traytour alls tite teris lete he falle,
Turnes hym furthe tite, and talkes no more,
Went wepand awaye, and weries the stowndys,
That ever his werdes ware wrought, siche wandrethe to wyrke.¹²

‘Repenting of all his grievous deeds’ he went away westwards, to Cornwall, and pitched his tents by the river named Tambire (Tamar). From there he sent a messenger to Guinevere at York, telling her of all that had taken place, and bidding her flee ‘with her children’ to Ireland; but she leaving York in the deepest despondency went to Caerleon, and there took the veil:

Askes thare the habite in the honoure of Criste,
and all for falsede, and frawde, and fere of hire loverde [*lord*]!

But Arthur seeing the madness of Gawain rushed from his ship with many knights, and searching the battlefield found his body ‘in his gaye armes, umbegrippede the girse, and on grouffe fallen’ (clutching the grass, fallen on his face). In an extremity of grief he uttered a passionate lament for Gawain (on this [see here](#)), whose body was taken to a monastery at Winchester. The king was advised to stay a while in Winchester to assemble his forces before pursuing Mordred, but Arthur would have none of it, expressing his hatred of Mordred in violent words, and vowing to ‘ever pursue the payganys that my pople distroyede’. He departed at once from Winchester and went west to Cornwall, where he came upon Mordred encamped in a forest. Challenged to battle, Mordred’s huge host, vastly outnumbering that of the king, emerged from the forest.

[Then follows the battle](#) of Camlan (but it is not named in the poem), a ferocious fight to the death of ‘the bolde Bretons’ [i.e. Britons] against such foes as ‘Peghttes and paynymes [Picts and pagans] with perilous wapyns’ and ‘ethyns [giants] of Argyle and Irische kynges’, told in some two hundred lines, with many individual encounters; many knights who fell are named, among them Marrac, Meneduc and Errac (who are named in *The Fall of Arthur*, [1.48–9](#))—and Lancelot (on his presence and death at Camlan [see here](#)). The battle ends with the fight to the death of Mordred and Arthur, with a graphic description of each hideous sword-thrust. Though he had received his death-wound, Arthur wielding his sword Caliburn slashed off the sword-hand of Mordred and ran him through as he lay on the grass.

But the king still lived.

[Thane they holde at his heste](#) hally at ones
[And graythes to Glasschenberye](#) the gate at the gayneste;
Entres the Ile of Aveloyne, and Arthure he lyghttes,
Merkes to a manere there, for myghte he no forthire.[13](#)

A surgeon of Salerno examined his wounds, and Arthur saw that he would never be healed. On his death-bed he ordered that Mordred’s children should be killed and drowned (‘Latt no wykkyde wede waxe, ne wrythe [*flourish*] one this erthe’), and his last words were of Guinevere:

I foregyffe all greffe, for Cristez lufe of hevene!
Yife Waynor hafe wele wroghte, wele hir betydde!

King Arthur was buried at Glastonbury, and with his burial the alliterative *Morte Arthure* ends.

Thus endis kyng Arthure, as auctors alegges,
That was of Ectores blude, the kyng sone of Troye,
And of Pyramous, the prynce, praysede in erthe;
Fro thethen broghte the Bretons alle his bolde eldyrs
Into Bretayne the brode, as the Bruytte tellys.[14](#)

At the victorious end of the sea-battle, with Arthur on his ship off Romeril, gazing at his own land in doubt of his best course, my father ceased to work on *The Fall of Arthur*: in my view, one of the most grievous of his many abandonments.

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THE UNWRITTEN POEM
AND ITS RELATION TO
THE SILMARILLION



THE UNWRITTEN POEM AND ITS RELATION TO THE SILMARILLION

The abandonment of *The Fall of Arthur* is qualified by the existence of manuscript notes of various value that indicate my father's thoughts and intentions for the continuation and conclusion of the poem, and of some of these it must be said that their content is both extremely interesting and extremely tantalizing. There are also scraps of further verse, though almost all are written so rapidly as to be in places beyond certain interpretation. Among these papers is a sketch of the narrative to follow the last part of the finished text, where Arthur, pondering the nature and outcome of an assault on the cliffs, opens his thought to Gawain that they would best postpone further conflict, and 'trusting to the wind and the ebb-tide' sail west along the coast 'to other landing' ([V.61-3](#)).

I give here this sketch: clearly contemporary with the concluding passage of the poem, it takes up no more than a single page, written in a manner somewhat but not greatly above my father's most impenetrable. I have expanded contractions and introduced trivial corrections for clarity.

Counsel. Arthur does not wish to risk his knights. He calls Gawain and proposes to turn west and run with wind and ebb down the channel west to other landing—ere Mordred could follow in power, to Cornwall of unkindly coast but kind people or to fair Lyonesse.[15](#)

But Gawain says we planned to attack Mordred right away. There he is. Sooner or later we must attack him. Every day adds to his strength and leaves the East open to the [? heathen].[16](#)

They gaze till the sun sinks. Gawain gazed in fretted wrath. [*Written in the margin: Arthur insists on leaving.*] As the sun westers the tide turns again. [Gawain leaps into a light](#) boat with his dearest friends, and bidding all that dare follow him they drive their craft with oars and ground it on the white beaches. Gawain leaps overboard and under a hail of arrows wades ashore and up the river course, seeking to win a passage to the cliff tops. Mordred eggs on his men. That day Gawain missed Gaheris and Gareth and dour-handed Agrava in his brethren.[17](#)

But he slew many men, level with those that stood on higher ground. He reaches the top but few are with him, though many are following. There he clears a way to Mordred. They fight and Gawain [?? falters]. The sun is sinking on his left hand [*written above: lights his shield*]. [A red ray strikes on](#) his shield and lights up the [griffon](#) [*on the shield*]. Galuth [*Gawain's sword*] breaks Mordred's helm and he falls back among his men, but snatches [a bow] from Ivor and turning shoots Gawain through the breast. Gawain falls, calling upon Arthur. Geryn, Gawain's esquire, slays Ivor, and Gawain's household fall on so fiercely that they win the cliff-top and stand about his body until Arthur's host comes [?? pressing] up. Arthur comes as Gawain dies, and the sun sinks beyond Lyonesse.

Here this outline ends. Another, evidently somewhat earlier, projects the narrative for the whole of the rest of the poem from the beginning of the fourth canto; but from Arthur's lament for Gawain it is reduced (if written at the same time as the outline, which is not certain) to hasty notes on two sides of a single page, and there are no other clues to my father's thoughts for the remainder of the poem.

Bright sun shines over Britain. Mordred's men are beating the woods for Guinevere, and they cannot find her. In the meanwhile sending men to the land of Leodogrance (Camliard in Wales) he goes east and assembles his host joining with the Saxons and Frisians. Wind blew fair from the south and the sea lay green beneath the white cliffs. Mordred had beacons built on cliff tops and hills, so that his host might assemble to whatever point Arthur came.

The ships of Arthur are seen approaching. A white lady with a child in her arms is Arthur's ensign. Before Arthur's ship sails a great white ship with a banner of a golden griffin. The sun is embroidered on its sails. That is Gawain. Still Mordred hesitates and will not have fire set in the beacon. For he thought in his heart, if Lancelot and Ban's kindred were in the navy he would draw off and make peace. For if he hated Lancelot the more he was of him now afraid. But the white lily on the black field of Lancelot was not seen, for Lancelot awaited the

Queen's summons. Then at last the beacon flamed and Mordred's host held the shore. Thus Arthur came to Romeril.

The Saxon ships before Romeril were driven away or sunk and set on fire, [but Arthur could](#) not land and was held back. [So Gawain thrust forth](#) his ship Wingelot (?)¹⁸ and others of his vassals, and they ground upon the white beach, which is soon stained red. The battle is fierce. Gawain leaps overboard and wades ashore. His yellow hair is seen towering above his dark foes. [He slays the King of](#) Gothland, and hews his way to Mordred's standard. Duel of Gawain and Mordred. Mordred driven back, but he catches a bow from a henchman and turns and shoots Gawain. [*Written in margin: Mordred saved by Ivor.*]

Gawain falls and dies by the rim of Ocean, calling for Arthur. In the meanwhile the fury of Gawain's men clears the shore and Arthur comes and kisses Gawain farewell.

Arthur's lament.

[I give here](#), for a reason that will quickly be apparent, both King Arthur's lament from the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and its form in *The Fall of Arthur*:

Than gliftis the gud kynge, and glopyns in herte,
Gronys ful grisely with gretande teris;
Knelis downe to the cors, and kaught it in armes,
Kastys upe his umbrere, and kyssis hym sone,
Lookes one his eye-liddis, that lowkkide ware faire,
His lipis like to the lede, and his lire falowede.
Than the corownde kyng cryes fulle lowde:
'Dere kosyn o kynde, in kare am I levede,
For nowe my wirchipe es wente and my were endide.
Here es the hope of my hele, my happynge of armes,
My herte and my hardynes hale on hym lengede,
My concelle, my comforth, that kepide myne herte!
Of alle knyghtes the kynge that undir Criste lifede,
Thou was worthy to be kynge, thofe I the corown bare.
My wele and my wirchipe of all this werlde riche
Was wonnen thourghe sir Gawayne, and thourghe his witt
one!
Allas!' saide sir Arthure, 'nowe ekys my sorowe!
I am uttirly undon in my awen landes!
A! doughtouse derfe dede, thou duellis to longe!
Why drawes thou so one dreghe? thou drownnes myn
herte!'¹⁹

The lamentation of King Arthur for Sir Gawain in *The Fall of Arthur* papers is at once in the very earliest stage of composition and unhappily in my father's most inscrutable hand. After much study this is the best rendering that I have been able to produce.

Then gloom fell grey on the good king's heart
and he groans amid gliding tears
looking upon his eyes now closed for ever
and his lips like lead and [? lily faded].
Then his [? crown] he cast down crying aloud
'Dear kinsman in care am I left
now my glory is gone and my grace [*written above: good*]
ended.
Here lies my hope and my help and my helm and my sword
my heart and my hardihood and my of strength
my counsel and comfort
of all knights the [?? noblest].
of all [?kings] the Christ lived
To be king I the crown bore.
I am [?utterly ruined] in mine own lands.
Ah, dread death thou dwellest too long,
thou drownest my heart ere I die.

In the alliterative *Morte Arthure* the king is reproved by his knights for his indecorous display of grief:

'Blyne', sais thies bolde men, 'thow blondirs thi selfen;
This es botles bale, for bettir bees it never.
It es no wirchipe iwysse to wryng thyn hondes;
To wepe als a woman, it es no witt holden.

Be knyghtly of contenaunce, als a kyng scholde,
And leve siche clamoure for Cristes lufe of heven!’²⁰

My father dashed down a few words here, with a heading ‘Sir Iwain comforts him with Beowulf’s words’:

to weep as a woman is not wit holden
better vengeance than lament

The passage from *Beowulf* in my father’s mind is I think certainly Beowulf’s words to Hrothgar, King of the Danes, in lines 1384–9 of the poem:

Ne sorge, snotor guma! Selre bið æghwæm,
þæt his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne.
Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan
worold lifes, wyrce se þe mote
domes ær deaþe; þæt bið drihtguman
unlifgendum æfter selest.

Grieve not, wise one! Better is it for every man
that he should avenge his friend than he should much
lament.

To each one of us shall come the end of life in the world;
let him who may earn glory ere his death. No better thing
can brave knight leave behind when he lies dead.

In the alliterative *Morte Arthure* there follows a vow made by King Arthur:

‘Here I make myn avowe,’ quod the kynge than,
‘To Messie and to Marie, the mylde qwenne of heven,
I sall never ryvaye ne racches uncowpyll
At roo ne rayne-dere, that rynnes appone erthe;
Never grewhownde late glyde, ne gossehawke latt flye,
Ne never fowle see fellide, that flieghe with wenge;
Fawkon ne formaylle appon fiste handill,
Ne yitt with gerefawcon rejoyse me in erthe;
Ne regnne in my royaltez, ne halde my Rownde Table,
Till thi dede, my dere, be dewly revengede;
Bot evere droupe and dare, qwylls my lyfe lastez,
Till Drighten and derfe dede hafe don qwate them likes!’²¹

My father’s initial thought for a rendering of the king’s vow to deny himself all forms of his principal pleasure reads thus:

Arthur’s vow
I will never hunt with hounds nor with hawk
Nor feast nor hear harp nor bear crown
[? nor sit at] the Round Table till I have avenged Gawain.

It needs no discussion to see that if my father did not have the alliterative *Morte Arthure* open in front of him, at the very least he had read this passage very recently, when he sketched out an initial version of Arthur’s lament for Gawain and his vow of self-denial.

I have already observed ([see here](#)) that the conception of a great sea-battle off Romeril in *The Fall of Arthur* was derived from the alliterative poem. From the outlines given above other features of this nature can be added. From the *Morte Arthure* come the ebbing of the tide, hindering Arthur from landing ([see here, here](#)), and Gawain’s taking a boat with a few companions and then wading ashore ([see here, here](#)). Gawain’s slaying of the King of Gothland in the fighting on land is from the same source ([see here, here](#))—but in the finished poem this is placed earlier, in the course of the sea-battle ([IV.202–3](#)). Among other details are the name of Gawain’s sword, *Galuth* ([IV.197–200](#)), and the golden griffon on his ship’s banner ([IV.144](#)) and his shield ([see here, here](#)).

It remains now to return to the second of the two outlines and the tantalizing notes that follow Arthur’s lament for Gawain, which are all that exist to give any idea of how my father saw the conclusion of *The Fall of Arthur* at about the time when he abandoned it.

Beneath the drafting for Arthur’s lament and vow is written:

Mordred is driven off and retires east. Arthur goes west. Lancelot ... [?? the body of Gawain]. *In the margin is written, presumably referring to Mordred: for lack of support all the east is held by him. At the foot of the page is jotted in pencil: Begin Canto V with Gawain's body being borne to Camelot.*

[On another page](#) are the following notes, written very rapidly indeed: in my transcript several words are scarcely more than guesses.

Strong sun. Arms of Arthur move first. Rumour of Mordred's attack. A little cloud in the East. Mordred comes unexpectedly out of a forest upon the Plain of Camlan. Iwain and Errak. Marrac and Meneduc. Idris and Ailmer.

Mordred has Saxons Frisians Irish Picts and Paynims [*i.e. Pagans*] with perilous weapons ([see here](#)). Arthur borne back. Mordred issues last. Arthur and Mordred slay one other. The cloud [?gathers] to darkness. All grows dark.

Arthur retires into the west. Rumour of Mordred's advance.

Mordred issues from forest.

Battle of Camlan. Arthur and Mordred slay one another.

Cloud [?gathers]. [Arthur dying in the gloom](#). Robbers search the field.

[Excalibur >] Caliburn and the lake. The dark ship comes up the river. Arthur placed upon it.

[Lancelot has no news. On a grey day of](#) [?? rain] he sets sail with Lionel and comes to Romeril where the crows are still over Romeril. As he rides along the empty roads the Queen comes down out of Wales and meets him. But he only asks where is Arthur. She does not know.

[He turns from her](#) and rides ever west. The hermit by the sea shore tells him of Arthur's departure. Lancelot gets a boat and sails west and never returns.—Eärendel passage.

Guinevere watching afar sees his silver banner vanish under the moon. Thus she came utterly to grief. She fled to Wales from the men of the east, but though grief was her lot it is not said that she mourned more for others than for herself. But so ended the glory of Arthur and the prowess of the ancient world, and there was a long darkness over the land of Britain.

Other hastily pencilled notes tell a little more of Lancelot and Guinevere.

[Lancelot came too late hearing](#) of Camlan, and meets Guinevere, but his lord loving all his love went to him. His love for Guinevere had no more power. In [?? pain] they parted cold and griefless. [?? She is alone.]

Lancelot parts from Guinevere and sets sail for Benwick but turns west and follows after Arthur. And never returns from the sea. Whether he found him in Avalon and will return no one knows.

[Guinevere grew grey](#) in the grey shadow
all things losing who at all things grasped.
..... gold and was laid in dust
as profitless to men as it proved of old.

With these papers are found on a separate sheet seventeen lines of alliterative verse in typescript, and from this fact and from the mention of Avalon in line 15 it is obvious that this is the 'Eärendel passage' referred to in the second outline above.

[The moon mounted the mists of the sea,](#)
and quivering in the cold the keen starlight
that wavered wan in the waiting East
failed and faded; the foam upon the shore
was glimmering ghostly on the grey shingle,
and the roaring of the sea rose in darkness
to the watchers on the wall.
O! wondrous night
when shining like the moon, with shrouds of pearl,
with sails of samite, and the silver stars
on her blue banner embroidered white
in glittering gems, that galleon was thrust
on the shadowy seas under shades of night!
Eärendel goeth on eager quest
to magic islands beyond the miles of the sea,
past the hills of Avalon and the halls of the moon,
the dragon's portals and the dark mountains
of the Bay of Faery on the borders of the world.

The first seven lines were later hastily altered by my father thus, largely for metrical improvement.

The moon was fallen into misty caves,
and quivering cold the keen starlight
wavered wanly in the waiting East
failed and faded; the foam upon the shore
was glimmering ghostly upon grey shingle,
and the roaring sea rising and falling
under walls of stone.

[On another page](#) is a pencilled text of verses in the primary stage of composition, with deletions and substitutions, of exceptional difficulty, but of the utmost interest in relation to the 'Eärendel passage' just given.

The grave of Gawain under grass lieth
by the sounding sea, where the sun westers.
What grave hath Guinever The grey shadow
her gold in [?ground] [(struck out:) gleams like]
her gold in silence unseen gleameth.
Britain nor Benwick did barrow keep
of Lancelot and his lady.
No [(struck out:) grave hath Arthur]
No mound hath Arthur in mortal land
under moon or sun who in
beyond the miles of the sea and the magic islands
beyond the halls of night upon Heaven's borders
[(struck out:) the] dragon's portals and the dark mountains
of the Bay of Avalon on the borders of the world.
up[on] Earth's border in Avalon [sleeping >] biding.
While the world w....eth
till the world [??awaketh]

In the penultimate line the verb is not *waiteth* and seems not to be *watcheth*. Beneath the verses is written: The tomb

*

The departure of Arthur

Among the scanty and enigmatic notes that I have given on [see here](#) there is so little that refers to the departure of Arthur after his mortal wounding in the battle of Camlan that must one look to other writings in the attempt to interpret them.

Of the departure of Arthur we have only these sentences ([see here](#)): *Arthur dying in the gloom. Robbers search the field. Caliburn and the lake. The dark ship comes up the river. Arthur placed upon it.* And subsequently we read that Lancelot sailed into the west following Arthur, but never returns, and *Whether he found him in Avalon and will return no one knows.*

I have given on [see here](#) Malory's account of Arthur's departure. In this he was following the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* fairly closely, rather than the French *Mort Artu* ([see here](#)). The most curious point, in relation to my father's notes, concerns the place and nature of Arthur's departure. In *Le Morte Arthur* it is said of the king and the knights Bedivere and Lucan that 'all night they in the chapel lay by [the sea side](#)', and Malory has 'not far from the sea'. In *Le Morte Arthur* Arthur orders Bedivere to cast Excalibur 'in the *salt flood*', and when Bedivere finally obeys the command 'into the *sea* he cast it': here Malory used the word 'water' ([see here](#)), but Bedivere reports to the king that he saw *waves* (waves). In the *Mort Artu*, however, the water is specifically a lake, as in my father's note: *Caliburn and the lake*. In Malory the vessel in which Arthur departed was 'a lytyll barge', in *Le Morte Arthur* it was 'a riche shyppe with maste and ore'.

Thus, in his intention, never fulfilled, my father had abandoned the conclusion of the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, where it is told of Arthur's death ([see here](#)) that after the battle of Camlan he was carried, as he desired, to Glastonbury and entered 'the Ile of Aveloyne', where he died. He was now following the story derived in essentials from the *Mort Artu*. But it is difficult to interpret the 'lake' in his notes; as is also the ship that 'comes up the river'.

It doesn't seem that the ancient evidences concerning the battle of Camlan shed any light on my father's conception here. The earliest record is found in a chronicle of the tenth century known as the *Annales Cambriae*, the Annals of Wales, which has an entry under the year 537 *Gueith Camlann* (the Battle of

Camlan) ‘in which Arthur and Medraut fell.’ Geoffrey of Monmouth said that the battle took place in Cornwall, on the river *Cambula*, but gave no other indication. In fact, it is not known where Camlan of the *Annales Cambriae* was, not even whether it was in Cornwall; but it came to be identified with the Cornish river Camel.²²

The river that bore Arthur away in my father’s note must derive ultimately from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Cambula*. But the apparent incongruities in these notes are best explained, I think, on the supposition that they represent his ideas in an unformed state: glimpses of scenes which were not as yet coherent and unified: the chapel by the sea, Excalibur cast into the sea—or lake, the river which brings the mysterious ship on which Arthur departs.

It is in any case abundantly clear that he would have nothing to do with the ending of the story of Arthur himself in the *Mort Artu*, in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, and in Malory ([see here](#)): the burial of his body at the hermitage to which it had been brought on the night following his departure in the ship—in the words of the hermit to Bedivere in *Le Morte Arthur*,

Abowte mydnyght were ladyes here,
In world ne wyste I what they were,
This body they brought uppon a bere
And beryed it wyth woundys sore.

[But Malory’s actual words](#) about the burial of Arthur at the hermitage chapel near Glastonbury are curious.

‘Sir,’ seyde sir Bedyvere, ‘what man ys there here entyred that ye pray so faste fore?’
‘Fayre sunne,’ seyde the ermyte, ‘I wote nat veryly but by demynge [*guessing*]. But thys same nyght, at mydnyght, here cam a numbir of ladyes and brought here a dede corse and prayde me to entyre [*bury*] him. And here they offird an hondred tapers, and they gaff me a thousande besautes.’
‘Alas!’ seyde sir Bedyvere, ‘that was my lorde kynge Arthur, which lyethe here gravyn [*buried*] in thys chapell.’

Thus of Arthur I fynde no more wrytten in bokis that bene auctorysed, nothir more of this verray sertaynté of hys deth harde I never rede, but thus was he lad away in a shyp wherein were three quenys

Now more of the deth of kynge Arthur coude I never fynde, but that thes ladyes brought hym to hys grave
But yet the ermyte knew nat in sertayne that he was veryly the body of kynge Arthur; for thys tale sir Bedwere, a knyght of the Table Rounde, made hit to be wrytten.

It seems plain that Malory was very sceptical of the strange story that he found in his sources.

But in respect of Arthur’s destination in the barge, or ship, his last words to Bedivere in Malory’s tale, already cited on [see here](#), must be recalled: ‘For I muste into the vale of Avylyon to hele me of my grevous wounde. And if thou here nevermore of me, pray for my soule!’ Malory was echoing Arthur’s words in *Le Morte Arthur*, here in response to the cry of Bedivere ‘lord, whedyr are ye bowne?’ [*Whither are you bound?*]:

I wylle wende a lytelle stownde [*while*]
In to the vale of Aveloune,
[A whyle to hele me of my wounde.](#)

This reference to the vale of Avalon is absent from the *Mort Artu*. In *The Fall of Arthur* it was of course to Avalon that the king was going. But where was Avalon?

In my father’s poem it was emphatically not Glastonbury in Somerset. In the notes given on [see here](#) Sir Lancelot, returned to Britain from Benwick, rides westward; and ‘*the hermit by the sea shore tells him of Arthur’s departure*.’ Then ‘Lancelot gets a boat and sails west and never returns.’ It seems to me all but certain that this hermit was the keeper of the chapel ‘not far from the sea’ or ‘by the sea side’ ([see here](#)) to which Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere brought the wounded king, though he is not mentioned in *Le Morte Arthur* or Malory. On this view, he saw, and told what he saw to Sir Lancelot, the ship bearing Arthur away from the coast, out to sea, and certainly not in the direction of a hermitage near Glastonbury for burial.

The association of Arthur’s grave with Glastonbury can therefore be described briefly. The earliest written record is found in a work of the Welsh antiquary Giraldus Cambrensis, or Gerald of Wales, written near the end of the twelfth century. After observing that fantastical tales were told of Arthur’s body, as that it had been borne to a region far away by spirits and was not subject to death, he said that ‘in our days’ Arthur’s body had in fact been found, by the monks of the abbey of Glastonbury, buried deep in the ground in a hollowed oak in the graveyard. A leaden cross was fixed to the underside of a stone beneath the coffin, in such a way that an inscription on the cross was concealed. The inscription, which Giraldus had himself seen, declared that buried there was the renowned King Arthur together with Wennevaria in *insula Avallonia* [*in the island Avallonia*].

(He records also the curious detail that beside the bones of Arthur (which were of huge size) and of Guinevere was a perfectly preserved tress of her golden hair, but that when it was touched by one of the monks it fell instantly to dust.) The date of this event is recorded as 1191.

In the same passage Giraldus said that what was now called *Glastonia* was anciently called *Insula Avallonia*. This name, he explained, arose because the place was virtually an island, entirely surrounded by marshes, whence it was called *Britannice* (in the British [i.e. Celtic] language) *Inis Avallon*, meaning, he said, *insula pomifera* 'island of apples', *aval* being the British word for 'apple', for apple-trees were once abundant there. He adds also that *Morganis*, who was a noble lady, akin to King Arthur, and ruler of that region, took him after the battle of Kemelen (Camlan) to the island which is now called Glastonia for the healing of his wounds.

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There is no need to pursue further the 'Glastonbury connection' into the complex questions of what lay behind this very curious 'discovery' of King Arthur's grave, and whether there were associations between Glastonbury and the legends of Arthur before 1191. It will however be clear how it came about that the author of the alliterative *Morte Arthure* could say ([see here](#)) that Arthur was taken to *Glasschenberye*, and yet *entered the Ile of Aveloyne*, and how the king could say to Bedivere, in the stanzaic *Morte Arthure* and in Malory, as he lay in the ship, that he will go to the vale of Avalon for the healing of his wound ([see here](#)).

But in *The Fall of Arthur* my father had no concern with Glastonbury in his reshaping of the legend. For him, beyond question, Avalon was an island in the remote West; but concerning its nature, in the notes that are appended to the poem, we learn nothing. There is a single, and mystifying, reference to Avalon in the poem itself (L204). [This is in a speech by Gawain](#) in which he reminds King Arthur of his uncounted might in chivalric arms, 'from the Forest's margin to the Isle of Avalon': which must mean that Avalon had become a part of Arthur's dominion in the western seas, unless it is no more than a sweeping rhetorical suggestion of the extent of his power in East and West.

Of Arthur's departure Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum*, as already noted ([see here](#)), said no more than that for the healing of his wounds he was borne to the Isle of Avalon (*in insulam Avallonis*). [But in another, later work of his](#), the *Vita Merlini*, a poem in Latin hexameters, he gave an account of Avalon and the coming there of King Arthur, as if in the words of the Welsh bard Taliesin. In this poem the isle is named (using the same etymology, *aval* 'apple', as did Giraldus) *Insula pomorum que fortuna vocatur*, 'the Island of Apples, which is called the Fortunate Isle': for in this blessed land all things are brought forth of themselves: there is no need of farmers to plough the fields, where corn and grapes appear without tending. 'Thither after the battle of Camlan (*post bellum Camblani*) we took the wounded Arthur, and there we were received with honour by Morgen, who laid the king on a golden bed in her own chamber and looked long at the wound, saying at last that he could be restored to health if he were to stay with her for a long time and submit to her cure. Rejoicing therefore we committed the king to her and returning gave our sails to the following winds.'

[The earliest account](#) in literature of Arthur's departure in the ship is found in the *Brut* of Lazamon, on which [see here](#). According to Lazamon the place of the great battle was Camelford, and the armies came together 'upon the Tambre', the river Tamar, which is a long way from Camelford. I cite here Lazamon's lines on King Arthur's words as he lay mortally wounded on the ground and the coming of the boat that carried him away.²³ It will be seen that the metre is the heir to the ancestral form seen in *Beowulf* (and indeed in *The Fall of Arthur*) but with longer lines, the half-lines linked now by rhyme or assonance rather than alliteration; while the vocabulary is almost wholly Old English.

'And ich wulle varen to Avalun to vairest alre maidene,
to Argante þere quene, alven swiðe sceone,
and heo scal mine wunden makien alle isunde,
al hal me makien mid haleweize drenchen.
And seoðe ich cumen wulle to mine kinerichen
and wunien mid Brutten mid muchelere wunne.'
Æfne þan worden þer com of se wenden
þat wes an sceort bat liðen sceoven mid uðen,
and twa wimmen þer inne wunderliche idihte,
and heo nommen Arður anan, and aneouste hine vereden,
and softe hine adun leiden and forð gunnen hine liðen.
.....
Bruttes ileveð ȝete þat he bon on live,
and wunnien in Avalun mid fairest alre alven,

and lokieð evere Bruttes ȝete whan Arður cumen liðe.
 ‘And I will go to Avalon, to the fairest of all maidens,
 to Argante the queen²⁴, an elf most fair,
 and she shall make whole my wounds
 make me all whole with healing draughts.
 And afterwards I will come again to my kingdom
 and dwell among the Britons with great joy.’
 Even with the words there came from the sea
 a short boat journeying, driven by the waves,
 and therein two women marvellously arrayed,
 and forthwith they took up Arthur, and bore him swiftly,
 and laid him gently down, and departed.

 The Britons believe yet that he lives
 and dwells in Avalon with the fairest of all elves,
 and the Britons ever yet await when Arthur will return.

This passage is peculiar to Lazamon: there is nothing corresponding to it in Wace’s *Brut*.

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In the case of *The Fall of Arthur* there is a further aspect of ‘Avalon’ to be considered: the perplexing question of the relationship between the ‘island of apples’ or ‘Fortunate Isle’, the Avalon to which King Arthur was taken, that was briefly described by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the *Vita Merlini* ([see here](#)), and the Avalon of my father’s own imagined world.

It was a long time before that name emerged for the island called Tol Eressëa, the Lonely Isle, in the furthest waters of Belegaer, the Great Sea of the West; and there is no occasion here to enter into an account of my father’s strangely changing vision of the Lonely Isle in the earlier years of ‘The Silmarillion’. On the other hand, it is relevant to try to discern his thinking on the matter during the time when he was working on *The Fall of Arthur*.

The only precise date to assist in this is 9 December 1934, when R.W. Chambers wrote to congratulate him on ‘*Arthur*’, then in progress ([see here](#)); but this of course gives no indication of how near he was at that time to abandoning the poem.

Long afterwards, in a letter of 16 July 1964, he told how he and C.S. Lewis had agreed, at some time now unknown, each to write a story: Lewis’s to be a tale of space-travel and my father’s a tale of time-travel. Lewis’s *Out of the Silent Planet* was finished by the autumn of 1937, and my father’s *The Lost Road*, very far indeed from finished, was sent with other works in a fateful parcel to Allen and Unwin in November of that year. In September *The Hobbit* had been published; on 19 December 1937 he said in a letter ‘I have written the first chapter of a new story about Hobbits’.

Many years later he described, in that letter of 1964, his intentions for *The Lost Road*.

I began an abortive book of time-travel of which the end was to be the presence of my hero in the drowning of *Atlantis*. This was to be called *Númenor*, the Land in the West. The thread was to be the occurrence time and again in human families (like Durin among the Dwarves) of a father and son called by names that could be interpreted as Bliss-friend and Elf-friend. It started with a father-son affinity between Edwin and Elwin of the present, and was supposed to go back into legendary time by way of an Eädwine and Ælfwine of circa A.D.918, and Audoin and Alboin of Lombardic legend, and so to the traditions of the North Sea concerning the coming of corn and culture heroes, ancestors of kingly lines, in boats (and their departure in funeral ships). In my tale we were to come at last to Amandil and Elendil leaders of the loyal party in Númenor, when it fell under the domination of Sauron.

There survives (printed in *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, 1987, p.12) the original sketch of his ‘idea’ for the concluding legend that my father dashed down at great speed. ‘This remarkable text,’ I wrote of it in that book, ‘documents the beginning of the legend of Númenor, and the extension of “The Silmarillion” into a Second Age of the world. Here the idea of the World Made Round and the Straight Path was first set down ...’ There exist also two versions (*ibid.* pp.13 ff.), close in time, the second a revision of the first, of a brief narrative that was the forerunner of the *Akallabêth* (published with *The Silmarillion*). On the second text (only) my father later pencilled on the manuscript a title: *The Last Tale: The Fall of Númenor*.

My study of these texts showed that *The Fall of Númenor* and passages in *The Lost Road* ‘were intimately connected; they arose at the same time and from the same impulse, and my father worked on them together’ (*ibid.* p.9). I came therefore to the conclusion that “Númenór” (as a distinct and formalized conception,

whatever “Atlantis-haunting”, as my father called it, lay behind) arose in the actual context of his discussions with C.S. Lewis in (as seems probable) 1936.’

In the first of the two texts of *The Fall of Númenor* there occurs this passage:

[when] ... Morgoth was thrust again into the Outer Darkness, the Gods took counsel. The Elves were summoned to Valinor ... and many obeyed, but not all.

But in the second version this was changed to read:

But when Morgoth was thrust forth, the Gods held council. The Elves were summoned to return into the West, and such as obeyed dwelt again in Eressëa, the Lonely Island, which was renamed Avallón: for it is hard by Valinor.

This is one of the first occurrences of the name *Avallón* for *Eressëa*. In the fragmentary narrative of the Númenórean story for *The Lost Road* that was all that my father ever wrote of it Elendil tells his son Herendil:

And they [the Valar] recalled the Exiles of the Firstborn and pardoned them; and such as returned dwell since in bliss in Eressëa, the Lonely Isle, which is Avallón, for it is within sight of Valinor and the light of the Blessed Realm.

To this time, it may be supposed, belongs an entry in *The Etymologies* (an extremely difficult working text from this period published in *The Lost Road and Other Writings*) under the stem LONO- (p.370):

lóna: island, remote land difficult to reach. Cf. *Avalóna* = *Tol Eressëa* = the outer isle. [Probably added subsequently: *A-val-lon*.]

Another entry that bears on this name, under the stem AWA-, reads (in part):

away, forth; out. Q[uenya] *ava* outside, beyond. *Avakúma* Exterior Void beyond the World. [To this was added: *Avalóna*, cf. *lóna*.]

These etymologies do not accorde with the explanation of the name (‘hard by Valinor’) in the second version of *The Fall of Númenor*.

At this time, when my father was pondering the successive tales that were to constitute *The Lost Road*, but of which only fragments would ever be told, he wrote down at great speed a note on the possibility of a story of ‘the man who got onto the Straight Road’. That man would be Ælfwine, the Englishman of the tenth century of whom my father had written much in earlier years: the mariner who came to the Lonely Isle and there learned from the Elves the histories that are set out in *The Book of Lost Tales*. I give here my father’s note:

But this would do best of all for introduction to the Lost Tales: How Ælfwine sailed the Straight Road. They sailed on, on, on over the sea; and it became very bright and very calm—no clouds, no wind. The water seemed thin and white below. Looking down Ælfwine suddenly saw lands and mountains [*or a mountain*] down in the water shining in the sun. Their breathing difficulties. His companions dive overboard one by one. Ælfwine falls insensible when he smells a marvellous fragrance as of land and flowers. He awakes to find the ship being drawn by people walking in the water. He is told very few men there in a thousand years can breathe air of Eressëa (which is Avallón), but *none* beyond. So he comes to Eressëa and is told the Lost Tales.

It is interesting to compare this with the conclusion of *The Silmarillion* in the version entitled *Quenta Silmarillion*, the form of the work before my father laid it aside during *The Lord of the Rings* years (*The Lost Road and Other Writings*, pp.333–5). Here the name *Avallón* for *Tol Eressëa* had entered, but not yet the conception of the Straight Road.

Here endeth *The Silmarillion*: which is drawn out in brief from those songs and histories which are yet sung and told by the fading Elves, and (more clearly and fully) by the vanished Elves that dwell now upon the Lonely Isle, *Tol Eressëa*, whither few mariners of Men have ever come, save once or twice in a long age when some man of Eärendel’s race hath passed beyond the lands of mortal sight and seen the glimmer of the lamps upon the quays of Avallón, and smelt afar the undying flowers in the meads of Dorwinion. Of whom was Eriol one, that men named Ælfwine, and he alone returned and brought tidings of Cortirion [city of the Elves in Eressëa] to the Hither Lands.

There is no need to pursue the subject of *Avallón* into the complexities of later development, which are fully recounted in *Sauron Defeated* (1992). I have attempted in this summary only to suggest what that name meant

to my father in the context of ‘The Silmarillion’ at the time when he was working on *The Fall of Arthur*, and probably nearing its abandonment.

It seems to me that one should assume a considerable passage of time for the emergence of so huge a perturbation of the existing myth, brought about by the irruption of Númenor and its drowning, the elemental refashioning of the earth, and the mystery of the ‘Straight Path’ leading to a vanished ‘past’ denied to mortals. I think therefore that it is at least quite probable that this evolution in ‘The Silmarillion’, together with the new enterprise of *The Lost Road* and the severe doubts and difficulties that my father encountered, were in themselves sufficient to account for his turning away from *The Fall of Arthur*.

This would indeed argue a surprisingly late date for its abandonment, but there is in fact a very curious and puzzling piece of evidence which seems to support this supposition. This is a single page of very rough notes, a list of successive ‘elements’ in the narrative, all of which are found elsewhere. The latter part of the list reads thus:

	Battle of Camlan
	Arthur slays Mordred
	& is wounded
Aug 1937	Carried to Avalon
	Lancelot arrives too late
	[? rejoins] Queen
	Goes in ship West and is never heard of again

At some time after this list was made my father entered the bracket that separates ‘Carried to Avalon’ from what precedes, and against the bracket (I.e. on the same line as ‘Carried to Avalon’) wrote ‘Aug 1937’.

The most natural way, perhaps, to interpret this is that my father had reached (in verse, if not in polished form) ‘Arthur slays Mordred and is wounded’, but no further, at that time. The problem with that, of course, is that he had not even reached the Battle of Camlan: the poem ceases with the end of the fighting at Romeril, and the manuscript evidence gives no indication that verse-form ever extended any further. I cannot explain this. But at least there seems to be evidence here that my father was still actively concerned with *The Fall of Arthur* in August 1937, surprisingly late as that seems.

But if this were the case, is any light cast thereby on the question, why did he at about this time write that *Tol Eressëa*, a name then going back some twenty years, was changed to *Avallón* – for no very evident reason? That there was no connection at all with the Arthurian Avallón seems impossible to accept; but it must be said that similarity to the departure of Arthur became still less evident.

In a letter of September 1954, after the publication of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, my father wrote a beautifully brief and lucid statement concerning Eressëa:

... Before the Downfall there lay beyond the sea and the west-shores of Middle-earth an *earthly* Elvish paradise Eressëa, and *Valinor* the land of the *Valar* (the Powers, the Lords of the West), places that could be reached physically by ordinary sailing-ships, though the Seas were perilous. But after the rebellion of the Númenóreans, the Kings of Men, who dwelt in a land most westerly of all mortal lands, and eventually in the height of their pride attempted to occupy Eressëa and Valinor by force, Númenor was destroyed, and Eressëa and Valinor removed from the physically attainable Earth: the way west was open, but led nowhere but back again—for mortals.

It seems to me that the most that can be said is that the Fortunate Isle, the Avalon of Morgan la Fée, and the Avallón that was Tol Eressëa, are associated only in that they both have the character of an ‘earthly paradise’ far over the western ocean.

Nonetheless, there is good reason, indeed, compelling evidence, to believe that my father did expressly make this connection, although the underlying motive may be difficult to interpret.

Among my father’s notes for the continuation of *The Fall of Arthur* the one that tells Lancelot took a boat and sailed into the west, but never returned, is of particular interest in the present context on account of the words that follow and conclude the note: ‘Eärendel passage’ ([see here](#)). These lines of alliterative verse, found together with the notes for the continuation of *The Fall of Arthur*, have been given on [see here](#).

In this brief poem ‘the galleon was thrust on the shadowy seas’, and Eärendel ‘goeth to magic islands ... past the hills of Avalon ... the dragon’s portals and the dark mountains / of the Bay of Faery on the borders of the world.’ In these lines my father was expressly introducing elements of the mythical geography of the First Age of the World as originally described in *The Book of Lost Tales*, but which largely survived into much later texts of ‘The Silmarillion’.

In the tale of ‘The Hiding of Valinor’ in *The Book of Lost Tales Part I* it is told that in the time of the fortification of Valinor the Magic Isles were set in a great ring in the ocean as a defence of the Bay of Faëry. By the time of the version of ‘The Silmarillion’ entitled *The Quenta*, written or largely written in 1930, this was said (*The Shaping of Middle-earth*, 1986, p.98):

In that day, which songs call The Hiding of Valinor, the Magic Isles were set, filled with enchantment, and strung across the confines of the Shadowy Seas, before the Lonely Isle is reached sailing West, there to entrap mariners and wind them in everlasting sleep.

It is notable that the expression ‘the Bay of Faery on the borders of the world’ in the last line of the ‘Eärendel passage’ is found frequently in early writings. It constitutes the fourth line in the second version of the alliterative poem *The Children of Húrin*, in or before 1925 (*The Lays of Beleriand*, 1985, p.95):

Ye Gods who girt your guarded realms
with moveless pinnacles, mountains pathless,
o’er shrouded shores sheer uprising
of the Bay of Faëry on the borders of the World!

[In *The Quenta* all these names](#) appear together in the story of Eärendel (*The Shaping of Middle-earth*, p.150). On their voyage to Valinor bearing the Silmaril Eärendel and Elwing in the ship *Wingelot*

came unto the Magic Isles, and escaped their magic; and they came into the Shadowy Seas and passed their shadows; and they looked upon the Lonely Isle and they tarried not there; and they cast anchor in the Bay of Faërie upon the borders of the world.

Particularly striking are the words ‘the dragon’s portals’ in the penultimate verse of the ‘Eärendel passage’. In the tale of ‘The Hiding of Valinor’ it is told (*The Book of Lost Tales Part I*, pp.215–16) that the Gods ‘dared a very great deed, the most mighty of all their works’:

‘They drew to the Wall of Things, and there they made the Door of Night.... There it still stands, utterly black and huge against the deep-blue walls. Its pillars are of the mightiest basalt and its lintel likewise, but great dragons of black stone are carved thereon, and shadowy smoke pours slowly from their jaws. Gates it has unbreakable, and none know how they were made or set, for the Eldar were not suffered to be in that dread building, and it is the last secret of the Gods.’

(The expressions ‘dragonheaded door’ and ‘Night’s dragonheaded doors’ are found in early poems: *The Book of Lost Tales Part II*, pp.272, 274.)

In this earliest form of the astronomical myth ‘the galleon of the Sun’ passes through the Door of Night, ‘goes out into the limitless dark, and coming behind the world finds the East again’, returning through the Gates of Morn. But this conception was early overtaken by a new form of the myth, in which the Sun does not enter the Outer Dark by the Door of Night but passes beneath the Earth. The Door of Night remained, but changed in purpose and the time of its making. In the brief work named *Ambarkanta*, *The Shape of the World*, of 1930 or a little later, the new significance of the Door of Night is expressed in these passages (*The Shaping of Middle-earth*, pp.235, 237):

About all the World are the Ilurambar, or Walls of the World. They are as ice and glass and steel, being above all imagination of the Children of Earth cold, transparent, and hard. They cannot be seen, nor can they be passed, save by the Door of Night.

Within these Walls the Earth is globed: above, below, and upon all sides is Vaiya, the Enfolding Ocean.

In the midst of Valinor is *Ando Lómen*, the Door of Timeless Night that pierceth the Walls and opens upon the Void. For the World is set amid Kúma, the Void, the Night without form or time. But none can pass the chasm and the belt of Vaiya and come to that Door, save the great Valar only. And they made that Door when Melko [Morgoth] was overcome and put forth into the Outer Dark; and it is guarded by Eärendel.

I have of course set out here all these passages, chosen from an immense body of writing, not for their own intrinsic significance, but to reinforce the remarkable nature of my father’s deliberate and substantial evocation of a cardinal myth of his own ‘world’, the great voyage of Eärendel to Valinor, in relation to Sir Lancelot of Arthurian legend—to whom, indeed, he was now ascribing a great voyage across the western ocean.²⁵

It will be observed that in these lines of the ‘Eärendel passage’ ([see here](#)) the only name that does not derive from the ‘Silmarillion’ narratives is *the hills of Avalon*. Comparing the description of the voyage of Eärendel and Elwing in the quotation from *The Quenta* given on [see here](#), where after the passage of the Shadowy Seas

and the Magic Isles ‘they looked upon the Lonely Isle and they tarried not there’, it seems at least very probable that ‘Avalon’ here bears the meaning ‘Tol Eressëa’, as in the texts of the 1930s cited on [see here](#). If this is so, then where my father wrote in a ‘Silmarillion’ context that *Tol Eressëa* was renamed *Avallon*, he also wrote *Avalon* for *Tol Eressëa* in an Arthurian context.

It may be thought that the ‘Eärendel verses’ show no more than a large parallel between two great westward voyages. But the second poem, in the first phase of composition and extraordinarily difficult to read (and with two most unfortunate illegibilities), found among these papers²⁶ and given on [see here](#), introduces much more extraordinary associations.

These verses open with the reflection that while Gawain’s grave lies ‘by the sounding sea, where the sun westers’ there are no burial mounds of Lancelot or Guinevere, and ‘no mound hath Arthur in mortal land’—and the verses that follow concern Arthur: but they are very closely similar, or nearly identical, to the concluding lines of the ‘Eärendel verses’. It is not immediately obvious which of these two ‘poems’, for convenience here called *Eärendel’s Quest* and *Arthur’s Grave*, preceded the other. It might seem that the much more finished form, in typescript, of *Eärendel’s Quest* suggests that it is the later; but the fact that the names closely associated with the Eärendel legend accompany the figure of Eärendel in that poem, whereas in *Arthur’s Grave* those names are associated with King Arthur, seems to me a stronger argument that *Arthur’s Grave* followed *Eärendel’s Quest*.

It is said at the end of *Arthur’s Grave* that Arthur ‘bides’ (changed from ‘sleeps’) in Avalon, while the Bay of Faëry becomes the Bay of Avalon. On the face of it, Arthur’s living presence ‘in Avalon’ suggests that the name is here used in the familiar Arthurian sense of the island to which Arthur was taken to be healed by Morgan La Fée; but its appearance in the context of ‘Silmarillion’ names seems also to indicate that it was Tol Eressëa.

Similar is the change of the name of the Bay of Elvenhome (or of Faërie, or of Eldamar) to the Bay of Avalon. The name Avalon, now used of Tol Eressëa, is here extended from the isle to the coasts of the vast bay in which Tol Eressëa was anchored.²⁷

It seems then that the Arthurian *Avalon*, the Fortunate Isle, *Insula Pomorum*, dominion of Morgan la Fée, had now been in some mysterious sense identified with Tol Eressëa, the Lonely Isle. But the name *Avallon* entered, as a name of Tol Eressëa, at the time when the Fall of Númenor and the Change of the World entered also ([see here](#)), with the conception of the Straight Path out of the Round World that still led to Tol Eressëa and Valinor, a road that was denied to mortals, and yet found, in a mystery, by Ælfwine of England.

How my father saw this conjunction I am wholly unable to say. It may be that through absence of more precise dating I have been led to combine into a contemporaneous whole ideas that were not coherent, but emerged and fell aside in that time of great creative upheaval. But I will repeat here what I said in *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, p.98, of my father’s intentions for his ‘time-travel’ book:

With the entry at this time of the cardinal ideas of the Downfall of Númenor, the World Made Round, and the Straight Road, into the conception of ‘Middle-earth’, and the thought of a ‘time-travel’ story in which the very significant figure of the Anglo-Saxon Ælfwine would be both ‘extended’ into the future, into the twentieth century, and ‘extended’ also into a many-layered past, my father was envisaging a massive and explicit linking of his own legends with those of many other places and times: all concerned with the stories and the dreams of peoples who dwelt by the coasts of the great Western Sea.

*

In conclusion, it remains to consider those notes of my father’s for the continuation of the story of Lancelot and Guinevere ([see here](#)).

We learn of Lancelot after his return, too late, from France that he rode west from Romeril ‘along the empty roads’, and that he met Guinevere ‘coming down out of Wales’. Already the narrative was set to turn definitively from that found in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, which was closely followed by Malory, of whose account I gave a brief sketch on [see here](#). My father’s notes, exceedingly brief as they are, show beyond question that the later years of this Guinevere will know nothing of a nunnery, or of ‘fastynge, prayers, and alme-dedis’ with a long face, and she will certainly not call upon Lancelot in such words as these:

‘But I beseche the, in alle thyng,
That newyr in thy lyffe after thysse
Ne come to me for no sokerynge,
Nor send me sond, but dwelle in blysse:
I pray to Gode eyur lastynge

To graunt me grace to mend my mysse.’²⁸

Still less will this Lancelot reply in such words as these of Malory’s:

‘Now, my swete madame,’ seyde sir Launcelot, ‘wolde ye that I shuld turne agayne unto my contrey, and there to wedde a lady? Nay, madame, wyte you well that shall I never do, for I shall never be so false unto you of that I have promysed. But the selff [*same*] destiny that ye have takyn you to, I woll take me to, for the pleasure of Jesu, and ever for you I caste me specially to pray.’

All otherwise was their meeting when she came down from Wales as my father would tell it. It was indeed foreseen in verses of the third canto:

Strange she deemed him,
by a sudden sickness from his self altered. (III.95–6)

Strange he deemed her
from her self altered. By the sea stood he
as a graven stone grey and hopeless.
In pain they parted. (III.106–9)

In the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* there was great sorrow at the last meeting and the parting in the nunnery:

But none erthely man covde telle
The sorow that there by-gan to bene

and in Malory’s tale ‘there was lamentacyon as they had be stungyn with sperys’ ([see here](#)); but there was determination and resignation. In the last meeting between them in the notes to *The Fall of Arthur* ([see here](#)) there was desolation and emptiness. In the first of the notes that bear on this Lancelot asks of Guinevere only: *Where is Arthur?* Though the mood is of course altogether different, this has something of the pared-down poignancy of Morwen’s question to Húrin concerning Túrin as she died: ‘If you know, tell me! *How did she find him?*’ Húrin said nothing; and Guinevere had nothing to tell. Lancelot ‘turned from her.’

In another note concerning their last meeting it is said that Lancelot had no love left but for Arthur: Guinevere had lost all her power over him. The words of the third canto are repeated: ‘In pain they parted’, but now is added ‘cold and griefless’. This Lancelot is not going to spend his last years in fasting and penance, and to end his life eating and drinking so little that he ‘dried and dwyned away’ ([see here](#)). He went to the sea shore and learned from the hermit who dwelt there that Arthur had departed west over the ocean. He set sail to follow Arthur, and no more was ever heard of him. ‘Whether he found Arthur in Avalon and will return no one knows.’

But what lay before Sir Lancelot, is declared by the poet in the concluding lines of the third canto. Though filled with a lighter mind and new hope in Benwick after the great storm had passed, ‘the hour he knew not’:

The tides of chance had turned backward,
their flood was passed flowing swiftly.
Death was before him and his day setting
beyond the tides of time to return never
among waking men, while the world lasted.

One may imagine that my father saw his story of the departure of Sir Lancelot as re-enacting in some sense the tale of Tuor, father of Eärendel (Tuor was the son of Huor, the brother of Húrin; he wedded Idril Celebrindal, the daughter of Turgon King of Gondolin). In the *Quenta* of 1930 this is told of him:

In those days Tuor felt old age creep upon him, and he could not forbear the longing that possessed him for the sea; wherefore he built a great ship Eärámë, Eagle’s pinion, and with Idril he set sail into the sunset and the West, and came no more into any tale.

Eärendel afterwards built *Wingelot*, and set out on a great voyage, with a double purpose: to find Idril and Tuor, who had never come back, and ‘he thought to find perhaps the last shore and bring ere he died a message to the Gods and Elves of the West.’ But Eärendel did not find Tuor and Idril, nor did he on that first western voyage reach the shores of Valinor.

We last see Guinevere watching from far off the sails of Lancelot’s departing ship: ‘she sees his silver banner vanish under the moon.’ There is mention of her flight into Wales to escape from ‘the men of the East.’ From my father’s few pencilled sentences it seems that her life henceforward held nothing but grievous

loneliness and self-pity; 'but though grief was her lot it is not said that she mourned for others more than for herself.' Two lines of verse that he wrote ([see here](#)) have the air of an epitaph.

Guinevere grew grey in the grey shadow
all things losing who at all things grasped.

*

THE EVOLUTION OF THE POEM



THE EVOLUTION OF THE POEM

It was a remarkable feature of my father's 'Norse' poems, *The Lay of the Völsungs* and *The Lay of Gudrún*, that of work preceding the finished text there survive only a few pages, and apart from these 'there is no trace of any earlier drafting whatsoever' (*The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, p.40). Obviously such material existed, and was lost at some stage. Very different indeed is the case of *The Fall of Arthur*, where there are some 120 pages of drafting (preserved, not surprisingly, in a state of confusion) preceding the 'final' text given in this book. The movement from the earliest workings (often only partly legible) can be largely followed through succeeding manuscripts that underwent abundant emendation. In some parts of the poem confusing elements are the parallel development of different versions, and the movement of blocks of text to stand in different contexts.

The amount of time and thought that my father expended on this work is astounding. It would be possible of course to provide a complete and detailed textual apparatus, including an account of every emendation that arose in the successive manuscripts as he searched unceasingly for a better rhythm, or a better word or phrase within the alliterative constraints. But this would be a huge task, and in my view disproportionate.

On the other hand, to omit all textual commentary would be to conceal remarkable and essential elements of the poem's creation. This is especially so in the case of Canto III, which was the heart of the poem, the most worked upon, and the most changed in the process, and I have provided a fairly full account (fuller than might generally be thought desirable, and inevitably not at all points easy to follow) of that history as I understand it; but throughout my textual commentary on the poem I have frequently omitted minor alterations made for metrical or stylistic reasons.

In what follows I use the word 'draft' to refer to any or all of the pages of verse that precede the latest text of *The Fall of Arthur*, that is, the manuscript from which the text in this book is taken. This latest text does give the impression of having been written as a whole and set apart, and so might be regarded as 'final', but it underwent a good deal of correction and alteration subsequently, chiefly in the first two cantos. As a rule, indeed, no manuscript of my father's could be regarded as 'final' until it had safely left his hands. But in this case by far the greater number of such changes were made quickly in pencil; and of similar changes made to the manuscripts of my father's 'Norse' poems I wrote (*The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, p.40): 'I have the impression that my father read through the text many years later ... and quickly emended points that struck him as he went.' The same may well be true of *The Fall of Arthur*, but of course this cannot be determined. The fact that these changes are markedly more numerous in Cantos I and II may suggest renewed interest in the poem at some later date, which petered out.

However this manuscript is to be regarded, it must be constantly referred to, and I name it by the letters **LT**, for Latest Text.

[A most extraordinary aspect](#) of the writing of the poem is revealed in the draft pages: namely, that Canto I, the account of King Arthur's campaign into the East, so far from being the first to be written, was in fact introduced when work on the poem was well advanced.

There are two draft manuscripts of Canto II (the narrative of the news brought by the captain of the wrecked Frisian ship, and of Mordred's visit to Guinevere in Camelot), and also a single page carrying the opening of the poem. All three begin with the lines:

Dark wind came driving over deep water,
from the South sweeping surf upon the beaches ...

[The earliest, which](#) I will call *IIa*, has this title:

The Fall of Arthur

I

How [Mordred >] Radbod brought news and Mordred gathered his army to stay the king's landing

The text is in essentials the same as that of Canto II in LT as printed, though with a great many differences, but goes no further than the equivalent of line [II.109](#), in this text 'cormorants of the coast and the cold

marshes’.

[The second, following](#), draft text, called *IIb*, has the same heading as *IIa* on the first page, but has the whole text of the canto, with again numerous differences though not of structure.

The single page, *IIc*, of the canto, referred to above, follows the text *IIb*, and here the heading is thus:

The Fall of Arthur

II

How the Frisian ship brought news, and Mordred gathered an
army and came to Camelot seeking the queen.

But the figure II in this heading was a later extension from I.

It is notable that when Canto I was added no new narrative elements or references were added to what had become Canto II; but this, I presume, was because my father’s original plan had been to open the poem with Mordred and Guinevere, and he had not then considered any prior narrative necessary. One has only to read Canto II now, therefore, with this knowledge, to appreciate how little had been told of Arthur’s absence from Britain: no more is said of the previous history than the words that Radbod, the captain of the Frisian ship, spoke to Mordred before he died (the equivalence in the draft manuscript *IIb* of the lines [II.70–77](#) in the latest version):

Cradoc the accurséd hath thy counsel bewrayed, [*betrayed*]
in Arthur’s ears all is rumoured
of thy deeds and purpose. Dark is his anger.
He hastens home, and his host summons
from the Roman marches, riding like a tempest.

[Mordred’s warning to](#) Guinevere, [II.144–7](#), was present in *IIb* in this form, with a reference to Benwick:

Never again shall Arthur enter this kingdom,
nor Lancelot du Lake love remembering
from Benwick to Britain over broad waters
return to thy tryst!

Another, and notable, reference to Lancelot appears in *IIb* (repeated from *IIa*), where Mordred summons to his side ‘lords and earls ... faithful in falseness, foes of Arthur, lovers of Lancelot’: in LT (the latest text) *Lancelot* was changed to *treason* ([II.105](#)).

*

Canto III

For a number of reasons it is clearest, or at any rate least unclear, to begin this account with Canto III, ‘Of Sir Lancelot, who abode in Benwick’.

The draft manuscripts consist very largely of verses, but among them are three synopses of the story of Lancelot and Guinevere as my father thought to tell it, or rather to assume it, in his poem. They were numbered (subsequently) I, II, and III. All three were written very rapidly but seldom illegibly. I have expanded contractions and made a few very minor emendations.

Synopsis I opens with a passage in praise of Lancelot that was quite closely followed in [III.19–28](#). Then follows:

Gawain alone was almost his equal but of sterner mood, loving the king above men and above women, in courtesy cloaking mistrust of the Queen. [But the Queen](#) loved Lancelot, to his praise only would she listen. Thus jealousy awoke in lesser hearts, but most in Mordred’s whom her beauty inflamed. Lancelot rejoiced in the Queen’s beauty and served her ever but was loyal long to his lord, but the net closed about him and the Queen would not release him, but with laughter or with tears bent his purpose till he fell from loyalty.

Gawain guessed not but Mordred watched. [At length Mordred told](#) Gawain and his brothers Agravain and Gareth and said that as they were of the king’s kin they should warn him. Agravain jealous of Lancelot’s estate and favour on his brother’s behalf told the king. The court was rent with feud. [*Added: Agravain slain by Lancelot.*] Mordred told Guinevere and Lancelot that the betrayal was by Gawain’s purpose out of envy, and Lancelot believed the lie—though Gawain was in truth the one of all the knights who was not envious and thought only of the king and not himself. The king condemned the Queen to [*illegible word struck out and replaced by* and Lancelot to die] and men accused Lancelot of cravenhood since he had fled. But as the Queen

was led to the stake Lancelot appeared at the head of his kindred and rescued her and carried her off. Gareth [? and others] of Gawain's kin were slain. But Lancelot's mood sickened and he returned the Queen—but Arthur would not look on him again and he went back to Benwick.

Neither he nor his kindred fought any more for Arthur, not even when they heard of the attacks on Britain, nor of Arthur's sortie East. This chafed his followers and they mourned for his mood—repenting penitence and his humbled pride after losing himself for love and now love for loyalty spurned.

Now word came of Mordred's treachery—and Arthur arming against his own kingdom. Lancelot saw clearer the guile he was ensnared in. Half he thought of gathering his host to help Arthur. Then pride withheld him and the thought of Gawain whom he had wronged and his cold scorn. He thought he would go nonetheless if the king called. Where was Guinevere—he had not the might to go to Britain without joining with Arthur. Was she fair and false as men said (and Mordred)? Lightly she had left him and seemed not to pity his anguish or comprehend his penitence. If she sent to tell him of peril he would come. But no word came from Arthur whom Gawain guided. No word came from Guinevere who waited upon the times. Lancelot went not forth, but abode in Benwick. The sun shone out after storm and his heart lightened. He called for music and bade men be merry for life has still hope, but he knew not that the tides of chance had changed and he had missed the flood.

Synopsis II begins with a fairly close repetition of the opening of Synopsis I, as far as 'his will was bent and he fell from loyalty'. Then follows:

Gawain guessed but Mordred watched. Thus came the feud and the sundering of the Round Table which many have sung. [*Illegible word*] first cloud gathered over the glory of Arthur. Mordred moving darkly, warns both Lancelot and the king. The king's great anger, which Gawain tries to temper, but Mordred has for the time the king's ear. He vows that both Lancelot and Guinevere shall suffer death for treason—according indeed to just law. But Lancelot warned has taken Guinevere and fled to safety (this as Mordred intended) proclaiming guilt. In the attack on the castle many are slain including Agravain and Gareth, Gawain's kinsmen. Only then will Gawain join in. He challenges Lancelot, that no more noble knights be slain. But Lancelot's mood has changed: he repents the ruin he has wrought, and the Queen is frightened and unwilling to risk the peril of Lancelot's failure. First blow to Lancelot's love. Lancelot therefore treats and yields Guinevere on condition that she shall be pardoned and received in full honour. But the king will not pardon Lancelot—nor does Gawain urge it—and banishes him, and he departs with his kindred to Benwick.

Beside the number III of the third synopsis my father noted 'followed in poem'. This begins with a greatly reduced version of the openings of the previous two synopses, and there is a good deal of repetition from synopsis I in the concluding passage, but I will cite this text in full.

Lancelot was deemed doughtiest of Arthur's knights, and the fairest of all men—dark and splendid beside the gold of Gawain. Gawain only was almost his equal, but sterner in mood, and he loved the king only above men and above women, but mistrusted the Queen even ere the shadow fell. But the Queen loved Lancelot, and Lancelot rejoiced in the Queen's beauty and served her ever gladly, and loved her above women and above men. Honour and renown only loved he almost as dear. Therefore long was he loyal to his lord. But the net closed on him, and the Queen drew the toils ever tighter—for she released seldom that which she had or ceased to grasp for what she desired. Fair as fay-woman but fell-minded in the world walking for the woe of men. Thus with smiles and tears she bent Lancelot's will.

Thus came the feud that many have sung and the first cloud over the glory of Arthur, when swords were drawn in the king's house and brethren of the Round Table slew one another. [Struck out: Mordred contrived it, envying Lancelot, desiring the Queen, he betrayed Lancelot.] With cruel justice the Queen was condemned to the fire, but Lancelot rescued her and carried [her] afar. That day fell many knights by the hand of Ban's kindred, and among them Gawain's brother. But his mood sickened and the Queen disliked exile. He repented the slayings and returned the Queen—obtaining full pardon for her; but not for himself. He departed to Benwick with his kin and went no more to war with Arthur.

But word came of Mordred's treachery and of Arthur arming against his own kingdom. Half he resolved to gather his host and haste to the king. Pride withheld him, and the thought of the cold scorn of Gawain whom he had wronged. The king would summon him, if he had need. In thought of Guinevere anguish took him. Was she in danger—but he had no might to go to Britain without joining Arthur. Was she false as fair as some rumoured? Lightly she had left him with little pity. If she sent to him he would go at all peril against Mordred or Arthur. But no word came from Arthur who leaned on Gawain. No word came from Guinevere who waited upon the times to snatch the best from ruin. Therefore Lancelot abode in the tower of Ban torn in mind. The

storm fell. The sun shone forth and his heart lifted. He told himself that life yet held hope, tides change, but he knew not that the tides of time had passed their flood and that he had missed his chance.

*

The evolution of Canto III can to a large extent be followed in the draft papers, although there are uncertainties that I have been unable to resolve. Some primary workings survive, among them pages at a level of illegibility that can only be interpreted at all from knowledge of subsequent texts; but it is notable that even when composing at this speed my father was capable of doing so within the alliterative and metrical patterns.

[Following these](#) is a series of manuscripts proceeding in my father's common fashion, each one taking up the changes made to the previous one and then emended in its turn. [The first of these](#), which I will call **A**, is evidently his first writing out of a text, though far from complete, of the canto. This is in rough but legible form, still with many uncertainties and substitutions as he wrote. The text begins (III.19.):

Sir Lancelot lord of Benwick
of old was noblest knight of Arthur ...

Beyond this, the text **A** can be passed by, since it was soon (as I judge) overtaken by another manuscript, and noteworthy features in **A** reappear in this substantial and complex text, **B**²⁹.

[This manuscript opens with two pages](#), obviously written at the same time, neither with a title, and identical at almost all points save in the opening passage of the canto. In one of these, [which I will call](#) **B 1**, the opening is thus:

[In Benwick the blessed](#) once Ban was king,
whose fathers aforetime over fallow waters
in the holy lands their homes leaving
to the western world wandering journeyed,
Christendom bearing, kingdoms founding,
walls uprearing against the wild peoples.
Towers strong and tall turned to northward
had Ban builded; breakers thundered
loud below them in the looming shadows
of cavernous cliffs. Crowned with sunlight,
walled with splendour, wind-encompassed,
they watched the waters: war they feared not.

In the other manuscript page, **B 2**, the opening is the same, word for word, as that of LT (*'the Latest Text'*) III.1–10:

In the South from sleep to swift fury
a storm was stirred, striding northward
over leagues of water loud with thunder
and roaring rain it rushed onward;
their hoary heads hills and mountains
tossed in tumult on the towering seas.
On Benwick's beaches breakers pounding
ground gigantic grumbling boulders
with ogre anger. The air was salt
with spume and spindrift splashed to vapour.

After these different openings to the canto both manuscripts continue with 'There Lancelot over leagues of sea ...' as in the final text, but they differ from it where that has (III.14–18):

Dark slowly fell. Deep his anguish.
He his lord betrayed to love yielding,
and love forsaking lord regained not;
faith was refused him who had faith broken,³⁰
by leagues of sea from love sundered.

In their place both **B 1** and **B 2** have:

Dark slowly fell. Deep his anguish,
repenting repentance and his pride humbled,
that loyalty leaving at love's calling

he had love now lost loyalty seeking.

A passage on a separate page is marked for substitution at this point in B2, after the words ‘Deep his anguish’:

he had left loyalty at love’s calling;
his loyalty no longer his lord trusted,
his love was forsaken beyond leagues of sea.

After the opening pages B 1 and B 2 the text continues without duplication for some distance, and can therefore be called simply B. There are a number of cases where LT differs from B, as follows (many of these instances are found in A also). The line-references in each case are to the readings of Canto III in LT as printed in this book.

(III.46–53) [he long was loyal](#) to his lord Arthur,
nobly striving. But the net was strong
that caught him captive. The Queen held it,
and the silken toils slowly tighter
drew about him. Dear she loved him ...

The final version (‘among the Round Table’s royal order ...’) is given on another page of the B manuscript as an alternative; and a further alternative is suggested for III.53, ‘darkly hoarded. Dear she loved him’:

dearer deemed them darkly hoarded
kept and counted as the Queen’s treasure
locked in dungeon. Dear she loved him

(III.57–9) Fate sent her forth. Few things she loosed
her desire seized on. As the sun at morning ...

For the meaning compare Synopsis III, ‘She released seldom that which she had’ ([see here](#)).

(III.62) steel well-tempered. Strong will she bent.

[The original reading](#) here, in the manuscript A, was ‘Strength was broken.’ Against ‘Strong will she bent’ in B marginal readings are ‘Strong her purpose’ and ‘Swords she broke’. LT as written had ‘Strong oaths she broke’, changed in pencil to ‘Strong oaths they broke’.

(After III.67, later marked for omission)

Many a minstrel mournful singing
of that time hath told, of trust broken,
friends divided and faith darkened.

(III.74–8)
There Ban’s kindred with blood reddened
the house of Arthur high and golden.
The Queen was taken. With cruel justice
fair as fay-woman they to fire doomed her;
[to death they doomed her.](#) But her doom came not.
Lo! Lancelot, lightning kindled,
radiant, deadly, riding thunder

(III.82–3) Where LT has

Gaheris and Gareth Gawain’s brethren
by the fire fell they as fate willed it

B has a single line, later struck through:

there Gareth died, dear to Gawain.

(III.88–90) He mourned too late
in ruth for the ruin of the Round Table,
the fellowship and freedom of his fair brethren,
for Gareth grieving, Gawain’s kinsman –
unarmed he slew him, by ill fortune,

love requiting as he least purposed.

The last three lines of this passage were struck out at the same time as was the previous reference to Gareth (and in the preceding text A they were bracketed for exclusion). As a result of these deletions Gaheris and Gareth were not mentioned in LT as written, but the lines [III.82–3](#) were added in pencil.

(III.90–2) His pride he repented, his prowess cursing,
for the love yet longing of his lord Arthur;
he would heal yet honour

(After [III.101](#))
and many saw she whose mood darkened,
[> hardened]
who Lancelot with love guarded, [> tended]
but to kingless queen, captive rescued,
were she fair as fay, friendship showed not.

(III.102) For ‘With searing words’ B has ‘With soft speeches’,
but ‘with searing words’ was the reading of A.

([III.104–8](#)) The toils she weened for a time slackened
still in hand she held though his heart wavered.
Other times would come. Yet it irked waiting
and she stung him keenly. Strange he deemed her
from her self altered. Then sudden in vision
for a moment’s anguish as in mirror naked
her soul seeing and his self knowing
he stricken as stone stood there silent.

(After [III.119](#))
Pride few pitied from its peak fallen,
and Gawain doubted his good purpose.
His return forbade they, unless trial sought he,
standing meekly before stern justice.

(III.124–7) [Grief knew Arthur](#)
in his heart’s secret that his halls regained
wife unfaithful and more worthy missed,
his noblest knight in his need losing.

Shortly after this the text B divides again into two, and at the point ([III.143](#)) where LT moves on to

From western havens word was rumoured
of Arthur arming against his own kingdom

these further twinned texts return, surprisingly, to the opening passages of the canto in B 1 and B 2 ([see here](#)), with their placing reversed, that is to say, in the manuscript where the canto opens with ‘In Benwick the blessed once Ban was king’ there appears here the passage beginning ‘In the South from sleep in swift fury’, while in the other manuscript the reverse is the case. In both versions the passage in question is followed by the verses telling of Lancelot gazing from a window over the sea (cf. [III.11–14, 187–9](#)):

Thence now Lancelot over leagues of sea
in heaving welter from a high window
looked and wondered alone musing
doubtful-hearted. Dark slowly fell.

(where the other manuscript has ‘Dark had fallen’).

My father seems to have decided eventually that of all these arrangements the most satisfactory was to retain ‘In the South from sleep to swift fury’ as the opening of the canto, and that there was no place for the passage beginning ‘Benwick the blessed’. [See further](#).

From here the B text continues with ‘From western havens word was rumoured’ (III.143) in two successive forms, labelled ‘Version A’ and ‘Version B’. I give here differences in Version A (before emendation) from LT. It is clearest to set out the text of Version A from its beginning; this corresponds to III.143–173, but the passage [III.148–157](#) is absent.

From western havens word had hastened
 [*struck out*: of lords in Logres leagued in treason],
 of Arthur arming against his own kingdom;
 how a mighty navy manned with vengeance
 he swift assembled, that the sudden fury
 of striding storm stayed and hindered,
 beaten backward by rebellious seas.
 Now half he hoped and half wished not
 to receive summons swift and urgent
 to his king allegiance leal [*loyal*] recalling
 of Lancelot to his lord Arthur.
 To Guinever again as to glad sunlight
 thrust often back his thought wandered.
 There was war in Britain, wild deeds were wrought –
 was she false yet further to her faith renewed
 or did danger press her? Dear he loved her.
 Long she had left him, as were love ended,
 in wrath and ruin, no ruth showing,
 no pity feeling, proud and scornful.
 Dear he loved her. If danger threatened,
 if she sent him summons he would sail at night
 against foe or tempest through furious seas
 to lands forlorn as his lady bade him.

From this point Version A is the same as LT, from [III.174](#) to the end of the canto, with a few minor variations:

(III.174–6) But there came neither from his king command
 nor word from lady; only wind hurried
 over wide waters wild and voiceless.

(III.179) ere his blood reddens the brim of evening

(III.187) And Lancelot over leagues of wind

(After [III.194](#))
 waves white-crested washed receding

(III.204) high whitewinged, but on hills and dales

The following are differences in Version B from LT. The passage III.148–157 was absent, as in version A, but the text corresponding to [III.157](#) is distinct both from Version B and LT.

of striding storm stayed and hindered;
 beaten backward by rebellious seas
 it was held in harbour. With heart in twain
 now half he hoped, and half wished not,
 to receive summons swift and urgent
 to king his allegiance leal recalling
 of Lancelot to his lord Arthur.
 Yet pride pricked him prayer only
 to hear and answer humbly spoken.
 But there came neither claim nor entreaty,
 prayer nor order. Pride was wounded.
 In his mind saw he men that eyed him,
 and Gawain's glance gleaming coldly,
 forgiving gravely grief that he wrought him.
 So horn he blew not nor his host gathered
 though his heart was heavy with half-purpose,
 and his mood they mourned who most loved him.
 He waited and went not. Wild roared the sea.
 The towers trembled tempest-shaken.
 To Guinever again as to glad sunlight
 as from deep dungeon and its dark prison
 thrust often down his thought wandered.
 Wild deeds were wrought; there was war in Britain –
 was she false yet further to her faith renewed

or did danger press her?

This passage then continues as in Version A, as cited above, and continues to the end of the canto with no significant differences from A.

*

A further complete manuscript of Canto III, which may be called C, again without title or canto-number, is found in the collection of draft papers, as well and legibly written as the 'final' text (i.e. LT), which quite possibly it was intended to be. In relation to the B manuscript, or manuscripts, it does in fact almost reach the form in LT as that was written (before it too later received further pencilled corrections): almost all the passages detailed on [see here](#) were changed to the final form. Its existence shows my father's readiness to build his poem layer upon layer, copying the same or closely similar passages again and again, which allows the movement of the work to be followed at large or in fine detail.

Here there is only one passage in this further text C that need be expressly recorded. This is III.124–7, of which the B text is given on [see here](#). C originally had here:

Grief knew Arthur
in his heart's secret; that his halls regained
wife unfaithful and more

My father struck these lines out as he wrote them and replaced them with

in his heart's secret; and his house him seemed,
though fairest woman in her fell beauty
in the golden courts was queen again,
now less in gladness, and its light minished,

From this the final form was reached:

and his house him seemed
in mirth now minished, marred in gladness,

[Lastly, beside the opening passage](#) of the canto in C ('In the South from sleep to swift fury ...'). my father wrote in pencil: 'Or if this is Fit I In Benwick the blessed &c.' A 'fit' is an Old English word, meaning a part or portion of a poem, which my father sometimes used, though in reference to *The Fall of Arthur* he also used 'canto'. His meaning here can only be that he had it in mind that the 'Lancelot canto' might be the first canto of the poem, in which case *In Benwick the blessed* would be the opening lines. This may well explain the two parallel pages in the manuscript B ([see here](#)), each with one or other of the two opening passages.

*

[There is a further](#) curious complication in the history of Canto III. This is a manuscript, or series of manuscript pages amid the great heap of draft papers, in which the events leading to the feud and the breaking of the fellowship of the Round Table were to be told in a conversation between Lionel and Ector, kinsmen of Lancelot, recollecting together the grievous history.

This version begins with the passage 'In Benwick the blessed once Ban was king ...' in the form already encountered as the opening passage of the manuscript B 1 ([see here](#)), but with a different third line: where the other text has 'in the holy lands their homes leaving / to the western world wandering journeyed' the present text has '[from the ancient East](#), islands seeking / in the western world, wandering journeyed'.

Very legibly written in ink with some preliminary pencilled drafting, this version carries the canto number II in pencil. I give here the text in full, following from the last line of the opening passage, 'they watched the waters: war they feared not.'

[There now Lancelot](#), lord of Benwick,
dark hours endured and deep anguish.
His mood they mourned who most loved him,
friends and kinsmen that his fortune shared
leaving Logres and their lord Arthur.
Lionel and Ector alone sitting,
uncle and nephew, the evil days
to mind recalled. Mighty Ector,

Ban's younger son, of his brother speaking,
of his fame and folly, was filled with ruth.

'In former time of our fair brethren
he was proven peerless. Praise and glory
and men's worship for might and honour
he ever earned him, until evil grew
and faith divided. Too fair the queen,
the knight too noble, and the net too strong
that caught him captive. Not as queen, alas!
nor as liege lady, but than life more dear
he long loved her, yet loyal held him
to our lord Arthur. But love conquered.
He strove in vain in her strong fetters,
but release won not; and love unyielding
with tears or laughter the true as steel
bent slowly down to bitter sweetness.'

Lionel answered—lord proud-hearted,
in war unwavering, yet in wisdom cool
men's hearts he marked and their minds' purpose:
'Yea, little I love her, lady ruthless,
[fair as fay-woman](#) and fell-minded,
in the world walking for the woe of men!
Fate sent her forth. Yet I fouler deem³¹
the eyes of envy that are ever watchful,
the malice of Mordred moving darkly
with counsel poisoned to crooked purpose.
Lancelot he loved not for his large renown,
and for the queen's favour cursed his fortune;
Gawain he hated, who guile despised,
high and noble, hard in temper;
for the king loved him, to his counsel first
of his lieges listening; and he his lord guarded
as jealous hound doth gentle master.

I watched them oft. Words he whispered
with guile to Gawain, Guinevere accused
and Lancelot with lies slandered
darker than the deeds were. Dire was the anger
and grief of Gawain. Glad was Mordred;
for to Arthur's ears evil tidings,
harm to hearer, hurt to speaker,
he³² bluntly brought who best loved him.
Thus Gawain earned Guinever's hatred;
and Lancelot to her lie holdeth
that lust and envy loathly changed him
to evil adder—that only knight
who almost his equal envy knew not,
who in courtesy cloaked a cold mistrust
of the queen's beauty. Curséd falsehood!³³
There was snake in sooth, secret crawling,
and stealthy stinging, whom still he sees not!'

Ector answered: 'All our kindred
must bear the blame of that blind folly,
but Lionel only. We little hearkened
to thy words of wisdom, and too well loved him
for rights or reasons, wrong defending,
and the queen's quarrel our cause making
for love of Lancelot. Our love endureth,
though in twain we rent the Round Table's
freedom and fellowship, fiercely striving.
Swift swords we drew against sworn brethren,
ere the queen was taken. With cruel justice
to death they doomed her. But her death came not.
Lo! Lancelot as lightning's flame
radiant, deadly, riding thunder,
in sudden assault sweeping heedless
his friends of old felled and trampled.

[The queen he freed and carried her afar]

The last line was struck through, and beneath it my father wrote in pencil the words ‘I was with him’, presumably uttered by Sir Ector.

[Here this text](#), which may be called the ‘Lionel and Ector version’, referred to as **LE**, ends. I feel sure that no more was written of this telling of the tale in reported speech. It will be seen that from the line ‘Swift swords we drew against sworn brethren’, seven lines from the end, this text moves towards that of LT in Canto [III.71–80](#); and the last five lines are indeed all but identical with the text both of the earliest manuscript A and of its successor B ([see here](#)), which reads:

to death they doomed her. But her doom came not.
Lo! Lancelot, lightning kindled,
radiant, deadly, riding thunder,
in sudden assault sweeping heedless
his friends of old felled and trampled.

If this were all the evidence available, one would say that if my father did not have B in front of him, at any rate when he reached this point in the ‘Lionel and Ector version’ he must have retained the passage from B in memory; and if the latter, one might speculate that he realized at this point that Lionel and Ector were becoming mere mouthpieces for the story in retrospect as he had already told it. But as will be seen shortly ([see here](#)), the matter is more complex.

Before turning to this, however, this new version is of particular interest in that only here, and [in Synopsis I](#), did my father describe in any detail the machinations of Mordred. In the second synopsis ([see here](#)) it is said only that ‘Mordred moving darkly warns both Lancelot and the king’. In the third synopsis, which, my father noted, was followed in the poem, nothing is said of this at all, save in a rejected sentence ([see here](#)) that Mordred betrayed Lancelot; but it is also said that after his return to France, when pondering his course of action, he thought of ‘the cold scorn of Gawain whom he had wronged’ ([see here](#)). Of course, none of these synopses was a careful statement of a proposed narrative: rather, they were memoranda, significant ‘moments’ that he wished to bear in mind, and so set down in writing.

In Synopsis I, however ([see here](#)), we learn that Mordred told Gawain and his brothers; that Agravain told the king; and that Lancelot slew Agravain. The essential element in the story there is that Mordred, lying to Lancelot and Guinevere, said that the betrayal ‘was by Gawain’s purpose out of envy’; and Lancelot believed Mordred. Here appears first, what was repeated in the third synopsis, Gawain’s ‘cold scorn’ for Lancelot, by whom he had been wronged.

In the ‘Lionel and Ector’ version of the canto, *Mordred accused Guinevere and Lancelot to Gawain*, and in ‘anger and grief’ *Gawain told the king*, so earning Guinevere’s hatred, and her lie that Gawain had been changed by lust and envy into a snake—which Lancelot believed, and greatly wronged him.

This is a convenient place to introduce yet another text, very brief. The first of two pages was written in soft pencil, and looks as if it were dashed down as new composition, almost without punctuation; but it is surprisingly legible, though not at all points.

Lancelot was holden by low and high
freest most fearless of the fair brethren
of the Round Table ere ruinous time
and Mordred’s malice mischief compassed

At this point the text is interrupted by extraneous notes and it is not clear whether what follows is to be treated as continuous.

[jealousy awakened](#) joy was darkened
for none would the queen hear named in praise
save Lancelot alone it liked them ill –
the lesser in loyalty [*illegible*]
when Mordred’s malice moved to evil.
words were spoken of woman’s frailty
and man’s weakness, and many harkened.
The king men told how his court was dishonoured –
[? and *or* by] Mordred himself with mouth smiling
Yet the queen he told that her counsel was betrayed
by Gawain the good for his great purity
his love and loyalty to his liege Arthur.
Thus came the hate of Gawain and Lancelot

Thus came the hate of Gawain and Guinever
 Thus came the wrath of Arthur and Lancelot
 He left the company of the Round Table
 sailed back over sea to his seats of old
 to Joyous Gard in the jagged hills
 in Benoic the blessed where Ban had ruled

The story of the feud arising from the love of Lancelot and Guinevere seems here to be that Mordred told Guinevere that Gawain had told the King.

The last two lines (at the bottom of the page) are notable for the names. This is the only place in the *Fall of Arthur* papers where the name *Joyous Gard* appears ([see here](#), [here](#), [here](#)), here set 'in the jagged hills in *Benoic*'—elsewhere always *Benwick*: but *Benoic* is the form in the French *Mort Artu* ([see here](#)).

The second of the two pages was written in ink in a scrawl that is very hard to decipher. It begins with the line 'Thus came the hate of Gawain and Lancelot' and repeats the following six lines (with *Benwick* for *Benoic*). Then follows:

[? So] the worm had pierced all the wealth and root
 of the Tree of blossom in its time of [illegible word]
 so went Lancelot no more with his liege to battle
 on the far marches against the fierce Saxons.
 [illegible line]
 A word over the water of woe in Britain
 came to Lancelot in his land afar
 of Arthur arming against his own kingdom.
 he waited and went not. Word from [? his] lady
 came not [? him calling], from the king no summons
 to sail over salt water was sent to him
 for Gawain the good of Guinevere's [? friends]
 [illegible words]

These last words might be read as 'doubted as faithless'. It seems to me that this text was a very early sketching out of this element in the story. Incidentally, the lines in this text ([see here](#))

jealousy awakened joy was darkened
 for none would the queen hear named in praise
 save Lancelot alone it liked them ill –
 the lesser in loyalty

are reminiscent of the words of Synopsis I, [see here](#): 'But the Queen loved Lancelot, to his praise only would she listen. Thus jealousy awoke in lesser hearts ...'

There is also another single page that seems fairly certainly to be associated with the pages of the preceding text: it was found with them and is on the same subject, with one closely similar line. The text begins in mid-sentence, but the preceding page has disappeared; and was written very rapidly in ink.

of Arthur arming against his own kingdom.
 Oft he wondered whether word would come,
 would Arthur ask him for aid in war.
 Now Mordred's malice was made clear to him
 and many things he saw he had missed before.
 Oft then we wished and wondered that word might come
 to summon him to sail over salt water
 asking for his aid in Arthur's need.
 Or haply from Britain he would hear ere long
 and the queen would call him to comfort her.
 But no word came and he cursed the day
 and a black thought brooded in his breast at eve.
 Let the king be conquered—and the queen widowed.
 [In] Mordred shall remember the might of Benwick
 another more worthy shall that crown seize.
 Grim were his looks.
 Ector said to Lionel

I don't think that these last words show that this text was associated with the abandoned device of putting the retrospective story of Lancelot and Guinevere into the mouths of Sir Lionel and Sir Ector. I think it belongs

rather with an isolated note in which my father proposed to himself that some part of the earlier history should be ‘worked in with Lancelot’s musing—at the rising of the storm’, and should be further amplified ‘when Ector and Lionel discuss his inaction and chafe at it’ ([see here](#)). In the line ‘In Mordred shall remember’ the word ‘In’ seems clear but is obviously an error, perhaps for ‘Then’. I assume that ‘that crown’ refers to the crown of Britain. Lancelot’s speculation about a possibly desirable outcome of Britain’s woes is astounding, and has no echo anywhere in the draft papers. On the other hand, his perplexity of mind as portrayed in Synopsis I ([see here](#)), and similarly in Synopsis III ([see here](#)), could be seen as fertile ground from which so black a ‘black thought’ could ‘brood in his breast’.

[Returning to the question](#) of the Lionel and Ector text (LE) and its convergence with the B version ([see here](#)), the fact is that there exists another manuscript which is demonstrably earlier than LE, which my father was demonstrably following when he wrote LE, but from which Lionel and Ector are absent.

In this manuscript the *In Benwick the blessed* opening passage is in an earlier form than in any of its numerous other occurrences. In line 3 it has ‘from the ancient East, islands seeking’, as does LE ([see here](#)); but in addition it has the following readings where LE has the later ones ([see here](#)): in line 6 ‘against the wilderness’ for ‘against the wild peoples’; in line 7 ‘Tower’ for ‘Towers’ (and so ‘below it’ in line 9 for ‘below them’, ‘it watched’ and ‘it feared’ for ‘they’ in line 12); and ‘carven cliffs’ for ‘cavernous cliffs’ in line 10. These and many other corrections were written in the margins of this text, but I give it as it was before the corrections were made.

After the opening passage this further text continues thus, to be compared with that of LE on [see here](#).

There now Lancelot, the lord of Benwick,
 bitter days abode burned with longing.
 In former time of the fair brethren
 he was proven peerless; praise and glory
 and men’s worship for might and honour
 he had ever earned him, until evil grew
 and faith divided. Too fair the Queen,
 the knight too noble, and the net too strong
 that caught him captive. Not as Queen only
 nor as lady he loved her, but than life more dear
 he loved her long, yet loyal held him
 to his lord Arthur. Love was stronger.
 By her beauty blinded he bent at last,
 trust betraying, who was true as steel.
 Thus the seed was sown of sorrow unending.
 Eyes hath envy that are ever watchful:
 most was Mordred by malice goaded:
 he loved not Lancelot for his large renown,
 and for the queen’s favour cursed his fortune;
 Gawain he hated, great and steadfast,
 strong, unbending, stern in temper,
 who the queen mistrusted but the king worshipped
 as jealous as a hound gentle master
 watches unwearied. Words he spake then
 with guile to Gawain: Guinevere accused
 and Lancelot with lies slandered
 darker than the deeds were. Dire was the anger
 of Gawain the good—grief smote his heart.
 Thus to Arthur’s ears evil tidings,
 bitter words he brought who best loved him.
 Thus Gawain earned Guinevere’s hatred
 and Lancelot’s love he lost for ever;
 and Mordred watched moved to laughter.
 In twain was rent the Round Table’s
 freedom and fellowship with fierce quarrels.
 Swift swords were drawn by sworn brethren
 brother brother slew, blood spilled in wrath,
 ere the queen was captive. With cruel justice
 to death they doomed her. But the day came not.
 For Lancelot like lightning’s flame
 raging, deadly, riding the thunder
 in sudden assault sweeping heedless

his friends of old felled and sundered.
 The queen he freed, and carried her afar;
 then rage left him, and his wrath sickened,
 his mood faltered. He mourned too late
 in ruth for the ruin of the Round Table,
 the fellowship and freedom of his fair brethren,
 longing yet for the love of his lord Arthur,
 repenting his pride and his prowess even.

Pardon was denied him. Peace he sought for;
 honour yet would heal with his own sorrow,
 and the queen's estate with her king's mercy
 establish anew. Strange she deemed him;
 yet she liked little lonely exile
 as for love to lose her life's splendour.
 Thus in pain they parted. Pardon she was granted,
 in the courts of Camelot to be queen once more,
 though Gawain grudged it. Grace with Arthur
 Lancelot found not: from the land banished,
 from the Round Table reft of knighthood,
 from his height fallen to his homes afar
 he went as he would not. Woe knew Arthur
 in his heart's secret that his halls regained
 Queen surpassing fair at cost so heavy,
 his noblest knight in his need losing.

Not alone from the land over loud waters
 went Lancelot. Lords of his kindred
 many were and mighty. At their masts floated
 the banners of Blamore and of Bors the strong,
 of Lionel and Lavain and loyal Ector
 Ban's younger son. These to Benwick sailed
 Britain forsaking. In battle no more
 to Arthur's aid their arms bore they,
 but in the towers of Ban, tall and dauntless,
 watchful dwelt they, war refusing,
 Lancelot their lord with love guarding.

Here my father left a space, before continuing, as it appears, at the same time (and with line-numbering continuous with the text that preceded) and on a different subject. Later, in a smaller and more careful hand, he inserted in the margin following the words 'with love guarding':

in his days of darkness. Deep his anguish,
 repenting repentance and his pride humbled,
 who loyalty had left in love's service
 and love had now lost loyalty craving.

It is not obvious where this text should be placed in relation to the other manuscripts of Canto III, but from various indications I think it very probable that it stands closest to the earliest of them, A ([see here](#)) and may therefore be called as a mere convenience A*; but in any case it must be regarded as a distinct treatment, in view of the account given on how the feud came to pass, which is only found in the manuscript of the poem here and in the 'Lionel and Ector version' deriving from it ([see here](#)). That my father had A* in front of him when he wrote LE, and that as he wrote it he transformed it into a conversation between Lionel and Ector, is very plain. If I am correct in seeing A* as deriving from a time near to the beginning of my father's writing of the 'Lancelot canto', it would presumably follow that the idea of telling the story of Lancelot and Guinevere as a discussion between two Knights of the Round Table, kinsmen of Lancelot, was also early in the evolution of the poem, and early abandoned.

*

Canto I

I have said that the account in this manuscript A* of the feud that tore the Round Table apart is followed after a space by verses on a different subject, with continuous line-numbering. I set out here the lines of this manuscript at this point:

In battle no more

to Arthur's aid their arms bore they,
 but in the towers of Ban, tall and dauntless
 watchful dwelt they, war refusing,
 Lancelot their lord with love guarding.

Arthur eastward in arms journeyed,
 and war he waged on the wild marches ...

Here is the first appearance in the draft papers of what would become the opening lines of the poem, the first lines of Canto I, Arthur's campaign against the heathen invaders from the east. That my father had always intended to give an important place in his poem to the 'eastern campaign' of King Arthur seems very unlikely. There is only one reference to it in the synopses: this is in synopsis I ([see here](#)), 'Neither he [Lancelot] nor his kindred fought any more for Arthur, not even when they heard of the attacks on Britain, nor of Arthur's sortie East.' There are also some pencilled notes on an isolated slip of paper suggesting structural orderings of the cantos. One of these reads:

- I Arthur Eastward
- II Lancelot and the rising storm [*followed by an illegible reference to Guinevere*]
- III Mordred

The other reads:

- II Make Arthur's eastward journey immediately after Flight of Guinevere
- III Work in part of back history with Lancelot musing—at rising of storm. [*? More*] [when Ector and Lionel](#) discuss his inaction and chafe at it
- IV Romeril and Death of Gawain

These sequences, agreeing neither with each other nor with the structure of the poem in the latest text, probably reflect my father's own musings when Arthur's eastern campaign had appeared as a chief element in the narrative. In the remark on Canto III in the second group of notes he is seen reflecting on the mode in which the story in retrospect of Lancelot and Guinevere and the great feud is to be framed. Note II in the second group is hard to interpret.

I have to admit that while the sequence of composition in respect of the manuscripts of individual cantos can be worked out, I have found it impossible to detect with certainty the sequence in which these structural movements took place. But from the surviving draft material, which is sufficiently abundant, it does seem at least very probable that it was here, in the manuscript A*, suddenly, 'unheralded' as it were, that the great assault by King Arthur on the barbarians made its entry into *The Fall of Arthur*.

The relation between this earliest surviving manuscript of Canto I 'How Arthur & Gawain went to war and rode into the East', which is the latter part of A* but which I will distinguish as **AE**, for 'Arthur Eastward', and the final text, is extraordinary. I give here the text of AE for the first 28 lines, with the line-numbers of the (more or less) corresponding verses in LT (the Latest Text) given in the margin.

Arthur eastward in arms journeyed	(I.1.
and war he waged on the wild marches	
over seas sailing to Saxon lands,	
from the Roman realm ruin defending.	
Halls and temples of the heathen kings	(I.41.
his might assailed marching in conquest	
to misty Mirkwood's margin dreary.	(<i>After I.43, struck c</i>

The following eight lines were inserted into the text, at the time of writing, with a direction to place them after line 7:

Thus the tides of time to turn backward,	(I.5.
heathen men to tame his heart purposed,	
that with harrying fleets they should hunt no more	
on the shining shores and shallow waters	
of Southern Britain seeking booty,	
raiding and ravaging. Ravens croaking	(I.76.
the eagles answered in the air wheeling,	
wolves were howling on the wood's border.	

Lancelot he missed; Lionel and Ector, (I.44
 Bors and Blamore to battle came not.
 But the times drave him and treacherous fate,
 and Mordred's malice moved his counsels.
 Gawain guessed not guile or treason, (I.
 in war rejoicing; worship seeking
 before the foremost fiercely rode he
 [*struck out:* his king's bulwark.] Cold blew the wind. (I.
 From the west came word winged and urgent (I.143
 of war awaking and woe in Britain.
 Careworn came Cradoc the king seeking,
 riding restless; rent were his garments,
 with haste and hunger his horse foundered.

If one compared these two texts without any other knowledge one might suppose that the author was picking out lines from the longer text in any order that he pleased! But the reverse must be the case. I see no other solution to the puzzle but that those lines in the first part of AE must have remained alive and precisely memorable in my father's mind (or perhaps he held all of it in memory), and when he came later to write a much fuller poem on Arthur's campaign they reappeared, even in altogether different contexts. So the ravens that were croaking and the eagles that were wheeling, and the wolves that were howling on the wood's border, after the raids of the Saxon robbers and destroyers, reappear in lonely lands far removed from the coasts of Britain. And 'the wolves were howling on the wood's border' in the first line of the fourth canto of *The Fall of Arthur*.

But beyond the point reached above AE changes to become for fifty lines a very close forerunner of Canto I in the text LT, beginning:

To Arthur spake he evil tidings: (I.151–2
 Too long my lord from your land ye tarry!
 While war ye wage on the wild people
 in the houseless East

with only very slight divergences here and there. Then, from 'and tarnished shields of truant knights / our numbers swell' (I.200–1) AE omits [I.202–15](#), thus

our numbers swell. What need ye more?
 Is not Gawain true? Hath not greater menace
 aforetime fled that we faced together? (I.2

and continues to the end as in the final form, with 'anger' for 'vengeance' as the final word of the canto.

My father struck through with single pencil strokes the whole of the AE text, which ends here. In all the mass of draft papers for *The Fall of Arthur* there is no other element relating to Canto I save a single isolated page, very clearly written, beginning with the words 'thou wilt find their [*read thy*] friends as foes meet thee' ([I.194](#)). It is obviously the only surviving page of a text of Canto I that either immediately preceded LT or was at one further remove from it. It scarcely differs from the text in LT except for the lines following 'to the Isle of Avalon, armies countless', that is [I.205–210](#), which in this text read as follows:

knights more noble of renown fairer,
 men more mighty, nor our match in prowess,
 wouldst thou ever assemble. Here is earth's blossom
 that men shall remember through the mists of time
 as a golden summer ere the grey winter.

This is a convenient place to record several substantial corrections, made carefully in ink to the latest text of Canto I.

([I.9](#)) Two lines following the words *booty seeking* were struck out:

raiding and ravaging. His restless mood
 chafed as captive in cage enchained.

([I.25](#)) 'Fell thy hand is' was a correction of 'Fleet thy ships are'.

([I.43](#)) After ‘o’er many kingdoms’ the line ‘to misty Mirkwood’s margin dreary’ was struck out; [see here, here](#).

(I.56) After ‘As in last sortie from leaguered city’ the following lines were struck out:

when sudden the siege is swept backward
and daring men their doom almost
reverse by valour vain and splendid
against hope and hazard and a host of foes,
so Gawain led them.

([I.110–13](#)) As the manuscript was written these lines read before correction:

There evening came
with misty moon; mournful breezes
in the wake of the winds wailed in the branches,
where strands of storm

*

Canto II

I have shown earlier ([see here](#)) that in my father’s original conception *The Fall of Arthur* was to begin with the coming of the Frisian ship and Mordred’s visit to Guinevere in Camelot: the earliest texts give the opening canto the number I, and describe the content in these words: ‘How the Frisian ship brought news and Mordred gathers his army to stay the king’s landing.’

The earliest manuscript of the canto, which I have called *Ila* ([see here](#)), extends as far as line [II.109](#) in the final text. In the first draft, which it seems was quickly replaced in this respect, Mordred was actually to visit Guinevere before anything was said of the news brought by the captain of the wrecked vessel. Mordred looked from the window ‘in his western tower’ ([II.20](#)), as the ‘sea far below sucked and laboured’; then follows at once:

To Guenaver the golden, with gleaming limbs
that minds of men with madness filled,
his thought was turned, thirst-tormented.
He stepped on a stair steep-winding down
to her blissful bower ...

But this was rewritten (at once, as it appears):

His thought was turned, thirst-tormented,
to Gwenaver the golden, whose gleaming limbs
the minds of men with madness filled,
so fair and fell, frail and stony,
true and faithless. Towers might he conquer
and thrones overthrow and thirst slake not.
In her blissful bower ...

The rewritten passage was now close to the form in LT (see [II.25–32](#)), and the ‘stair steep-winding’ ([II.42](#)) no longer goes down, but leads upward to the battlements of the castle.

I record in what follows further differences in the earliest text (*Ila*) of Canto II and the second text *Iib* ([see here](#)) from LT, leaving out the many changes (often made for metrical reasons) that consist in the substitution of a single word or changes in word-order. It may be noted that many of the readings of *Iib* survived into LT and were rejected and replaced after that text had been written. The reading of LT is indicated by reference to the lines as printed in this book.

([II.47–65](#)) Text *Ila* has here:

Servants sought him, soft-foot running,
through hall and lodge hunting swiftly.
Before the queen’s chamber, closed and guarded,
doubtful they halted at doors of oak.
Then Ivor his squire the eager words

let loudly ring: ‘My lord!’ he called,
‘Tidings await thee – time is passing!
Come swiftly forth! [The sea spares us](#)
a shrift too short.’ He shook fiercely
doors strong-timbered. Drowsed and glowering
Mordred answered, and men trembled
as he stood there stony staring grimly:
‘Mighty tidings, that ye murder sleep
ransacking with rabble my royal castle!’
Ivor him answered: ‘Thine errand running
the Frisian captain on flying wings
hath fled from France but his fated ship
is broken on the beach. He is breathing still,
but life is waning and his lips wander.
All else are dead.’

In *Iib* and in LT Ivor’s reply to Mordred was retained from *Iia*; [II.60–4](#) were an emendation in the latter.

- (II.70–3) These lines were a pencilled addition in LT; *Iia*
and *Iib* have here:

Cradoc the accursed hath thy counsel bewrayed,
in Arthur’s ears all is rumoured ...

- (II.80–4) *Iia* and *Iib* have here:

Whitesand with boats, wherries and barges,
crowded as with conclave of clamorous gulls.
Shining on bulwarks ...

- (II.90–1) *Iia* has here (*Iib* as in LT):

faithful to hatred and faith scorning
his troth keeping to traitor lord
died as his doom was.

- (II.101–5) *Iia* has here, repeated in *Iib* with ‘falseness’ for ‘fickleness’:

through the land of Logres to lords and earls
whom he trusted that their tryst they would truly
hold
faithful in fickleness, foes of Arthur,
lovers of Lancelot, lightly purchased ...

This passage survived into the LT manuscript, where the text that replaced it was written in the margin.

- (II.108–9) Both *Iia* and *Iib* have here, where *Iia* ends:

of Almain and Angel and isles of the North,
cormorants of the coast and the cold marshes.

In all the following entries the text given is that of *Iib* (before any emendation) with the corresponding LT line reference in the margin.

- (II.110–20) He came to Camelot the queen seeking;
greedily he gazed on her with glittering eyes;
her grey eyes gaily his glance challenged,
proud and pitiless, yet pale her cheek;

In LT my father repeated this passage, but struck it out and replaced it on a separate page with the longer text beginning ‘Fiercely heard she his feet hasten’ at line 111. At line 119 the word *chill* was a replacement, with a query, of *still*.

- (II.128–33) to no noise of knighthood. Nights are weary.
Yet less than beloved or lower than queen

life here below shalt thou lead never.
A king courts thee ...

A pencilled change replaced this in *Iib*:

to no noise of knighthood. Yet never shalt thou
live unbeloved, nor less than queen,
though chances change—if thou choose aright.

The final text of LT was written in the margin of the manuscript.

([II.144–7](#)) For the text of *Iib* here [see here](#).

([II.157–65](#)) my thirst slaking;
for life is loathsome by longing haunted;
I will be king after and crowned with gold.
Then Guinever the proud, aghast in mind,
between fear and loathing, who in former day
wielding beauty was wont rather
to be sought than seized, dissembling spake:
'Eagerly my lord do ye urge your suit!
Delay allow me ...

([II.176–7](#)) These lines are absent in *Iib*.

([II.213](#)) and time's new tide turn to her purpose.

*

Cantos IV and V

In Canto IV the textual history is readily followed. The first manuscript, which would be constantly unintelligible without the later texts as a guide, is less a text of the poem than a record of my father 'thinking with his pen'. It may be that he was to some extent giving written form to verse that he had already prepared and memorised, but it is clear that he was also composing *ab initio*, experimenting as he went, often setting down several variants of an alliterative phase.

This manuscript was already remarkably close to the text of the latest version. Following it is a hastily written but legible text, somewhat emended in the usual fashion, leading to the text (LT) as printed. One passage of the canto in LT was rejected and another, longer version ([IV.137–154](#)) written, equally carefully in ink, on a separate sheet: the rejected text reads as follows:

At Arthur's side eager hastened
a mighty ship in the morn gleaming
high, white-timbered, with hull gilded;
on its sail was sewn a sun rising,
on its brodered banner in the breeze floated
a griffon glowing as with golden fire.
Thus Gawain came his king guarding
to the van hastening. Now to view came all:
a hundred ships with hulls shining,
and shrouds swelling and shields swinging.
Ten thousand told targes hung there ...

The few pencilled alterations to the text may be mentioned:

line 24 'like drops of glass dripped and glistened' replaced 'like tears of glass gleamed and tinkled';
lines 98–9 were a marginal addition;
lines 209–10 'as stalks falling / before reapers ruthless, as roke flying' replaced 'as starlings fleeing / from reapers ruthless, as roke melting'.

Lastly, the title of the canto as I have given it, 'How Arthur returned at morn and by Sir Gawain's hand won the passage of the sea', was a replacement of the original title written in ink 'Of the setting of the sun at Romeril'—which became the title of Canto V.

Of the the fifth canto no draft material in verse survives.

*

APPENDIX



APPENDIX:

OLD ENGLISH VERSE

The importance of the use of Old English ‘alliterative verse’ in my father’s sole ‘Arthurian’ poem seems to call for some indication, within the pages of this book, of its essential nature, preferably in his own words. His account of the ancient verse-form is indeed well known, appearing in his ‘Prefatory Remarks’ to the new edition (1940) by C.L. Wrenn of the translation of *Beowulf* by J.R. Clark Hall; these ‘Prefatory Remarks’ have been reprinted in *J.R.R. Tolkien: The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, 1983. I have also cited a portion of it in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, 2009.

On 14 January 1938 there was broadcast by the BBC a brief recorded talk by my father entitled ‘Anglo-Saxon Verse’. On this he expended much thought and labour, as is attested by a great deal of preliminary drafting, but here all that need be said is that there is also a later and much longer lecture on the subject, addressed to some audience actually present, clearly related to the broadcast talk but very distinct. For the present book I think it may be interesting to print some passages extracted, with minor editing, from this lecture, very different in scope and manner though belonging to the same period as the *Prefatory Remarks*.

For exemplification my father took the concluding lines of the Old English poem *The Battle of Brunanburh*, and gave an alliterative translation. The text of the lecture was subsequently much emended and many passages were marked for omission, perhaps for considerations of time. The date that appears in the first line, ‘1006 this autumn’, i.e. 1943 as the year of composition, was changed first to ‘1008’ and then to ‘1011

last autumn'; this presumably means that it was repeated in other places in those years.

Ne wearð wæl mære
on þýs églanðe æfre gýta
folces gefýlled beforan þýssum
sweordes wecgum, þæs þe ús secgað béc,
ealde úþwitan, syððan éastan hider
Engle and Seaxe úp becómon
ofer brád brimu, Brytene sóhton,
wlance wígsniþas Wéalas ofercómon,
eorlas árhwate eard begéaton.

No greater host
of folk hath fallen before this day
in this island ever by the edge of swords
in battle slaughtered, as books tell us
and ancient authors, since from the east hither
Saxon and English from the sea landed,
over the broad billows Britain assailing,
the Welsh smiting on war's anvil,
glory seeking great men of old,
in this land winning a lasting home.

So sang a court poet 1000 years ago – 1006 this autumn to be precise: commemorating the great Battle of Brunanburh, AD 937. So great was it that it was long remembered as *magnum bellum*. The victor was Æthelstan, Ælfred's grandson, one of the greatest monarchs of the day. His enemies were an alliance of Norse, Scots, and Welsh kings and chieftains. These lines are the ending of a short poem (73 lines long) that is embedded in the so-called 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle'. So it comes from the tenth century; the century of the great Æthelwulfing kings (descendants, that is, of Æthelwulf and Ælfred his son), when the English revived after the havoc of the ninth century. It is from the tenth century that we derive most of the documents, of prose and of verse, that have survived the later wrecks of time. The older world, before the Norse invasions, had passed away in ruin. All that has come down to us from that earlier time, the first flowering time of English verse, is preserved in tenth-century copies – all but a very few scraps.

It is in the records of the fifth century that the word ‘Anglo-Saxon’ first appears. Indeed it was King Æthelstan who, among other high titles such as *Bretwalda* and *Caesar*, first styled himself *Ongulsaxna cyning*, that is, ‘King of Angel-Saxons’. But he did *not* speak ‘Anglo-Saxon’, for there never was such a language. The king’s language was then, as now, *Englisc*: English. If you have ever heard that Chaucer was the ‘father of English poetry’, forget it. English poetry has no recorded father, even as a written art, and the beginning lies beyond our view, in the mists of northern antiquity.

To speak of Anglo-Saxon language is thus wrong and misleading. You can speak of an ‘Anglo-Saxon period’ in history, before 1066. But it is not a very useful label. There was no such thing as a single uniform ‘Anglo-Saxon’ period. The *fifth century*, and the coming of the English to Britain, to which the poet of *Brunanburh* referred in the *tenth century*, was as remote from him in time, and as different from his days in kind, as the Wars of the Roses are from us.

But there it is: ‘the Anglo-Saxon period’ covers six centuries. During that long age a great vernacular literature (to speak only of that) – I mean a ‘literature’ in the full sense, books written by cultivated and learned men – had arisen, and been ruined, and again to some extent revived. What is left today is only a tattered fragment of a very great wealth. But as far as can be seen from what is preserved, there is one feature common to all the verse of the period, older and later. That is the ancient English metre and technique of verse. It is quite unlike modern metres and methods, both in its rules and in its aims. It is often called ‘alliterative’ verse – and I will say a word on that in a moment. The ‘alliterative’ measures were used throughout the Anglo-Saxon period for *poetry in English*; and for English poetry only ‘alliterative’ verse was used. It did not, however, stop at 1066! It went on being used for at least four hundred years longer in the North and West. In the kind of verse meant for books (and so for educated people, clerical or lay) this ‘alliterative’ technique was elaborate and highly polished. It was used because it was admired and appreciated by cultivated men, and not simply because the poor ‘Saxons’ knew nothing else, for in point of fact they did. The English of those days were interested in verse and often quite accomplished metrists, and could when writing in Latin use many classical metres or compose in what we call ‘rhyme’.

Now this ‘alliterative’ metre has great virtues in itself. I mean that it is quite worthy of study by poets today as a technique. But it is also interesting as being a native art independent of classical models (I mean, as a metre: I am not talking about matter: the ancient English poets of those days often used alliterative verse for matter that they had got out of Greek and Latin books). It was already old in Ælfred’s day. Indeed it descends from days before the English came to Britain, and is almost identical with the metre used for the oldest Norse (Norwegian and Icelandic) poems. A great body of oral verse dealing with ancient days in the northern lands was known to minstrels in England, though little has survived beyond one long verse catalogue [*Widsith*] of the subjects of heroic and legendary song: a list of now forgotten or almost forgotten kings and heroes.

[It would take an hour or two](#) to explain properly the Old English metre and show how it works, and what kind of things it can do and what it cannot. In essence it is made by taking the half-dozen commonest and most compact phrase-patterns of the ordinary language that have two main elements or stresses – for example (lines from the translation of the passage from *The Battle of Brunanburh*):

- A *glóry séeking*
- B *by the édge of swóords*
- C *from the séa lánded*
- E *gréat men of óld*

[added later: D *bríght árchàngels*]

Two of these, usually different, are balanced against one another to make a full line. They are linked or cemented together by what is usually but wrongly called ‘alliteration’. It is not ‘alliteration’ because it does not depend on letters or spelling, but on sounds: it is in fact a kind of brief rhyme: head-rhyme.

The chief syllable – loudest (most stressed), highest in tone, and most significant – in each half must begin with the same consonant, or agree in beginning with a vowel (I.e. no consonant).

So in battle slaughtered as books tell us
or glory seeking great men of old
or ancient authors since from the east hither

In the last example there are *two* head-rhymes or ‘staves’ in the first half-line. That is often the case, but not compulsory. In the second half *two* are not allowed. The *first* important syllable, and that only, must ‘bear the stave’ or rhyme. This has important consequences. It means that you must always so arrange your phrases that the most important word comes first in the second half-line. There is thus always a drop in force, loudness, and significance at the end of an Old English line, and then the spring is wound up again at the beginning.

Very frequently the beginning of a new line repeats in more vigorous form, or produces some variation on, the end of the preceding line:

as books tell us // ancient authors
from the sea landed // over the broad billows

So all Old English verse is rich in parallelisms and verbal variations.

But there is of course a good deal more in Old English verse beside the mere sound patterns. There was the vocabulary and diction. It was ‘poetical’. Already in the first written survivals of English verse we find a rich vocabulary of poetry-words – and then as now these words were to a large extent *archaisms*, old words and forms that had fallen out of daily use in some senses, or altogether, but had been preserved by poetic tradition.

Kennings. Poetic ‘riddling’ expressions, sometimes called *kennings* (an Icelandic word meaning ‘descriptions’), are a marked feature of Old English verse diction, especially in more elaborate poems, and are one of its chief poetic weapons. Thus a poet may say *bán-hús* ‘bone-house’ and mean ‘body’; but mean you also (though with almost lightning swiftness) to think of a house being built with its wooden frame and beams and between them the clay packed and shaped in the old style, and then see the parallelism between that and skeleton and flesh. He may say *beado-léoma* ‘flame of battle’ and mean ‘sword’ – a bright blade drawn in the sun with a sudden flash; and similarly *merehengest* ‘sea-stallion’ for ‘ship’; *ganotes bæð* ‘the gannet’s bathing-place’ for ‘sea’. The Old English poet liked pictures, but valued them the more sudden, hard and compact they were. He did not unroll similes. You had to be attentive and quick-witted to catch all that he meant and saw.

In the Chronicle poem of the Battle of Brunanburh the poet speaks of *wlance wígsmiþas* overthrowing the Welsh – literally ‘splendid war-smiths’. You can say if you like that ‘war-smith’ is ‘just a kenning in

verse' for 'warrior': so it is in mere logic and syntax. But it was coined and used to mean 'warrior' and at the same time to give a sound-picture and an eye-picture of battle. We miss it, because none of us have seen or heard a battle of steel or iron weapons hand-wielded, and few now have seen an old-fashioned smith hammering iron on an anvil. The clang of such a battle could be heard a long way off: like a lot of men hammering on metal bars and hacking at iron-cooped barrels, or – very much like, for those who have heard it (as everyone had in those days), a smith beating out a plough-share, or forging chain-links: not one smith, though, but hundreds all in competition. And seen closer too, the rise and fall of swords and axes would remind men of smiths swinging hammers.

I have no more time to give to Old English verse methods. But you will see that it has some interest. And the attempt to translate it is not a bad exercise for training in the full appreciation of words – a thing already all people are perilously slack in nowadays: though it is really impossible. Our language now has become quick-moving (in syllables), and may be very supple and nimble, but is rather thin in sound and in sense too often diffuse and vague. The language of our forefathers, especially in verse, was slow, not very nimble, but very sonorous, and was intensely packed and concentrated – or could be in a good poet.

Appended to this lecture are four passages from my father's own 'alliterative' works. The first is *Winter Comes to Nargothrond* in the third version, almost exactly as in *The Lays of Beleriand* (1985), p.129. The second is a passage from the alliterative *Lay of the Children of Húrin*, *ibid.*, lines 1554–70, with many minor differences (a much developed version is given in *The Lays of Beleriand*, pp.129–30).

Most notably, the third and fourth extracts are taken from *The Fall of Arthur*. The first of these, as written in ink, consists of [III.1–10](#) (*In the south from sleep ...*) differing only in points of punctuation; later my father pencilled in the next four lines, to *Dark slowly fell* (which he marked with 'D'), and wrote against the extract *Descriptive Style*.

The second extract from *The Fall of Arthur* runs from [I.183](#) to 211 and agrees exactly with the text given in this book except that line I.200 *and tarnished shields of truant lieges* is omitted, and there is a different reading at line 207, *upon mortal earth* for *under moon or sun*. A notable feature of this text is that against each line my father wrote the relevant

letters referring to the patterns of strong and weak elements ('lifts' and 'dips') in each half-line ([see here](#)).

Arthur speaks:

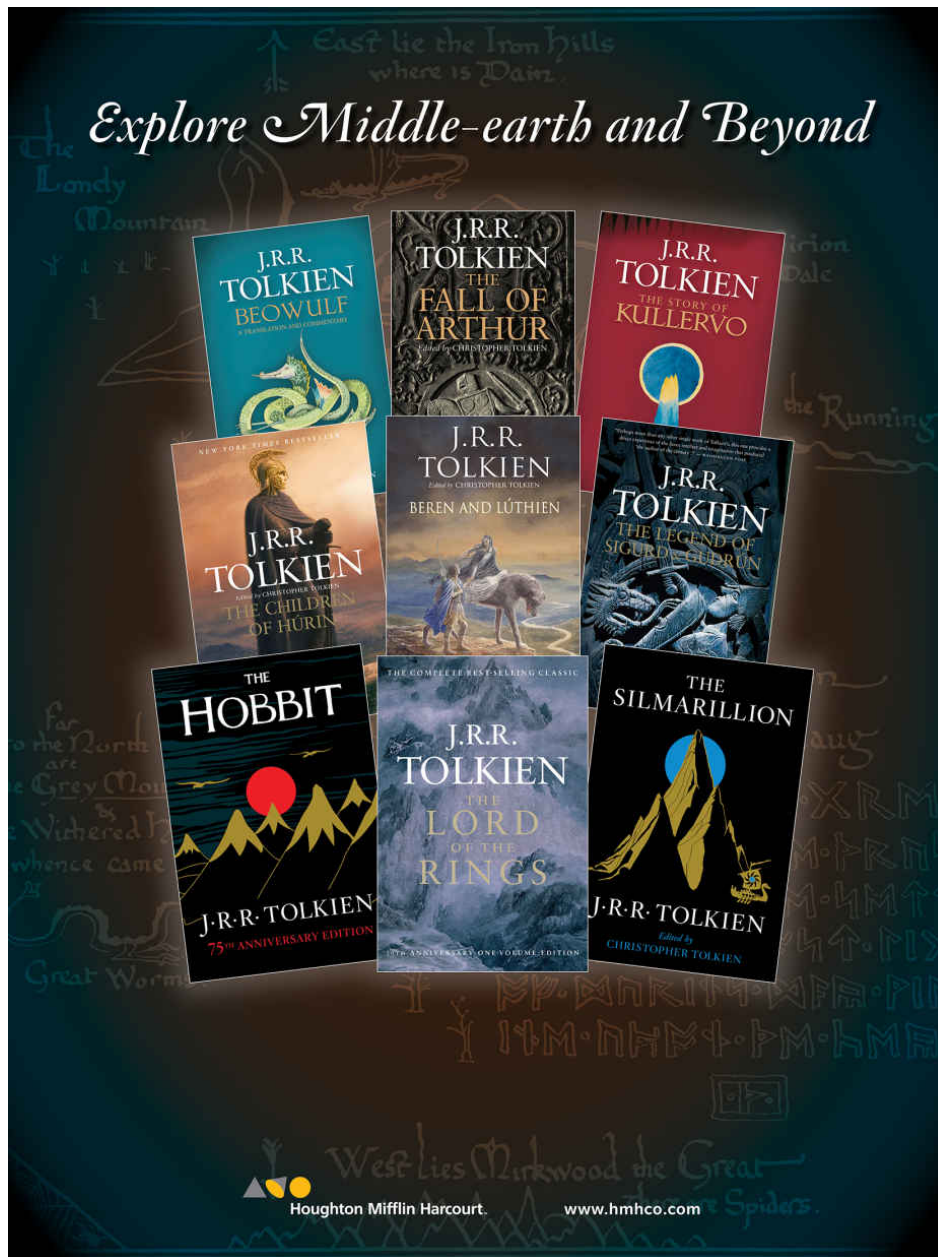
B C Now for Lancelot I long sorely
B B and we miss now most the mighty swords
C A of Ban's kindred. Best meseemeth
E A swift word to send, service craving
B C to their lord of old. To this leagued treason
B A we must power oppose, proud returning
B A with matchless might Mordred to humble.
A A Gawain answered grave and slowly:
A C Best meseemeth that Ban's kindred
+A C abide in Benwick and this black treason
A B favour nor further. Yet I fear the worse:
B C thou wilt find thy friends as foes meet thee.
B C If Lancelot hath loyal purpose
+A B let him prove repentance, his pride foregoing,
C C uncalled coming when his king needeth.
+A A But fainer with fewer faithful-hearted
C B would I dare danger, than with doubtful swords
B C our muster swell. Why more need we?
B B Though thou legions levy through the lands of Earth,
A C fay or mortal, from the Forest's margin
+A A to the Isle of Avalon, armies countless,
A A never and nowhere knights more puissant,
A C nobler chivalry of renown fairer,
A B mightier manhood upon mortal earth
B C shall be gathered again till graves open.
+A B Here free, unfaded, is the flower of time
+A B that men shall remember through the mist of years
B C as a golden summer in the grey winter.

It will be seen that there are no D half-lines and only one E in this extract. The sign +A is here used to indicate a prefixed dip or 'anacrusis' before the first lift in A half-lines. In lines 202 *Though thou legions levy*

and 211 *as a golden summer*, both marked B, the words *levy* and *summer* constitute ‘broken lifts’, where instead of a long stressed syllable there is a short stressed followed by a weak syllable.

This extract has a designation of the style of the passage, which is scarcely legible, but could be interpreted as ‘Dramatic and rhetorical’.

*



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Footnotes

- 1 [The name *Brut* of these](#) and other poems derives from an old fiction, greatly elaborated by Geoffrey of Monmouth, that a certain Brutus, grandson (or great-grandson) of Aeneas of Troy, was the first man to set foot in the very desirable island of Albion (which until then was only inhabited by ‘a few giants’), naming it ‘Britain’ from his own name, and calling his companions ‘Britons’. So in the opening of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in my father’s translation:
and far over the French flood Felix Brutus
on many a broad bank and brae Britain established
full fair ...
- 2 My father used a copy of the Early English Text Society edition, as revised by Edmund Brock, 1871, which he acquired in September 1919, and which I have used for the quotations in this book.
- 3 *Awkwarde on the umbrere* with a back stroke (?) on the visor; *nese* nose; *noyes hym sare* grieves him sore; *Beblede* made bloody; *mayles* chain-mail; *bowes the blonke* turns the horse; *burlyche brande* stout sword; *brene* cuirass; *O-slante* aslant; *slote* hollow above the breast-bone.
- 4 *ane* one; *mode* mood, mind; *mett* dreamed; *dares for dowte* lies still for fear; *dye as he scholde* as if he were about to die; *affraye* fear.
- 5 *schalkes* men; *Sakeles* guiltless; *cirquytrie* arrogance; *sere* various, many; *Schryfe the* confess; *schape* prepare; *schewynge* vision; *take kepe yif the lyke* take heed if you will; *fersely* violently.
- 6 Very oddly he is the slayer of the Emperor Lucius, although less than 200 lines later Lucius is slain again by King Arthur (verses cited above, [see here](#)).
- 7 The reference is to the *Lancelot* of the French poet of the later twelfth century Chrétien de Troyes, a work known also as *Le Chevalier de la Charette*, *The Knight of the Cart*. The name derives from an incident in the narrative in which Lancelot, the secret and impassioned lover of Queen Guinevere, set out to rescue her from captivity in the land of the prince Meleagant. Having lost his horse he accepted the offer of a dwarvish carter to be carried forward on his vital errand: but the cart was a tumbril, used to carry malefactors as a public spectacle to the place of execution. Lancelot thus showed himself ready to submit to the extremity of disgrace and ignominy in the eyes of the courtly world for the sake of Guinevere. That he hesitated momentarily before stepping into the cart of shame was held against him by his idolized lady, a defect in his absolute subservience to the code of *amour courtois*.
- 8 Malory ended his tale with these words: ‘Here is the ende of the hoole [*whole*] book of kyng Arthur and of his noble knyghtes of the Rounde Table. ... And here is the ende of *The Deth of Arthur*.’ William Caxton took the last sentence to refer to the whole compilation of Malory’s Arthurian tales, and ended the text of his edition of 1485 with the words ‘Thus endeth thys noble and loyous book entytled le morte Darthur’.

[9](#) *mykelle* much; *couthe* knew; *wrake* trouble, harm, ruin; *hele and layne* hide and conceal; *wene* doubt; *eme* uncle; *bydene* together; *mene* tell; *mayne* strength; *blynne* left (unsaid). In the first of these stanzas *Gaheriet* is the form in the *Mort Artu* and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* of the name of Gawain's brother Gareth, as he is named by Malory and in *The Fall of Arthur* (III.82).

[10](#) So in the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*:
That fals traytour, Sir Mordreid,
The kynges sister sone he was,
And eke his owne sone, as I rede.

[11](#) *Qwat gome* What man; *one growffe* on his face.

[12](#) *in kythe thare he lengede* in the land where he lived; *konyng* skill; *dole for his dede* sorrow for his death; *tite* quickly; *furthe* forth; *weries the stowndys* curses the time[s]; *werdes* fates; *wandrethe* woe.

[13](#) *heste* command; *hally* wholly; *graythes to Glasschenberye* make their way to Glastonbury; *the gate at the gayneste* by the shortest road; *merkes to a manere* goes to a manor-house.

[14](#) *thethen* thence; *Bretons* Britons; *eldyrs* ancestors; *Bruytte Brut* ([see footnote 1](#)).

[15](#) On other pages my father scribbled down alliterative lines and half-lines that follow from this summary, and this last sentence would be scarcely more than guesswork were it not confirmed by these lines on another page:

To Cornwall coming
of coast unkind but kind people
or in Lyonesse find loyal welcome.

Lyonesse is the name of the lost land west of the most westerly point of Cornwall ('Land's End'). In my father's early tale of Ælfwine of England ([see here](#)) is found the following (*The Book of Lost Tales Part II*, p.313):

Though Déor [father of Ælfwine] was of English blood, it is told that he wedded to wife a maiden from the West, from Lionesse as some have named it since, or Evadrien 'Coast of Iron' as the Elves still say. Déor found her in the lost land beyond Belerion whence the Elves at times set sail.

[16](#) Scraps of verse on other pages, beginning 'Gawain answered in grave wonder', show my father's first movements towards the versification of this passage in the outline, in which he reminds Arthur of their firm resolve and settled purpose.

[17](#) On another page are found these lines written with more care ([see here](#)):

in his wake followed
lieges of Lothian. But Lot's children
Gaheris and Gareth Gawain's brethren
that day missed he, and dour-handed
Sir Agravain: under earth lay they
by Lancelot in luckless hour
slain to his long sorrow

- [18](#) The question mark following ‘Wingelot’ is not editorial. On this name [see here](#), [here](#).
- [19](#) *gliftis* looks; *glopyns* is distressed, is confounded; *grisely* terribly; *gretande* weeping; *umbrere* visor; *lowkkide* closed; *lede* lead; *lire* face; *falowede* grown pale; *o kynde* by kin; *levede* left; *wirchipe* honour; *were* war; *hele* well-being, prosperity; *happyng* good fortune; *hale* wholly; *kepide* guarded, protected; *thofe* though; *one* alone; *ekys* is increased; *downttouse derfe dede* dread, stern death; *duellis* tarry; *drawes ... one dreghe* draw ... aside, hold back.
- [20](#) *Blyne* cease; *blondirs* distract; *botles* without cure; *bale* grief; *bees* will be.
- [21](#) *Messie* Messiah; *ryvaye* hunt by a river; *racches* hounds; *roo ne rayenedere* roe deer nor reindeer; *fellide* felled; *formaylle* female hawk; *dede* death; *dare* lie still; *Drighthen* the Lord; *derfe* hard, stern.
- [22](#) This river, of no great length, rises near Camelford (west of Launceston) and flows into the sea near Padstow (north-west of Bodmin).
- [23](#) I have cited this text from the manuscript Cotton Caligula A ix in Sir Francis Madden’s edition in three volumes of 1847, which for more than a century was the only edition of *Lazamon’s Brut*. My father acquired a very fine copy of this rare and costly work in 1927.
- [24](#) The name *Argante* seems likely to have been a corruption of *Morgen* in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini* ([see here](#)).
- [25](#) [In this connection](#) it may be recalled that (though with a query) Gawain’s ship was named *Wingelot*, Foam-flower, the name of Eärendel’s ship ([see here](#)).
- [26](#) Very primitive drafting for the opening lines is in fact found on one of the pages of the notes for the continuation of *The Fall of Arthur*.
- [27](#) In the original story the Lonely Isle was anchored in the mid-ocean, and no land could be seen ‘for many leagues’ sail from its cliffs’: this was the reason for the name.
- [28](#) *sokerynge* succouring, assistance; *sond* message; *mend my mysse* mend my wrongdoing.
- [29](#) A remarkable note appears in the margin of A (only) against the words *fair as fay-woman*, line III.75, where my father wrote *fair and faultless* (the latter word being perfectly clear).
- [30](#) In LT (‘*the Latest Text*’) this line read *to faith returning he was faith denied*, corrected in pencil to *faith was refused him who had faith broken*.
- [31](#) These two lines ‘in the world walking ... Yet I fouler deem’ replaced ‘with beauty perilous, yet blame I more (the eyes of envy ...)’.
- [32](#) Gawain; and again three lines below.
- [33](#) The earliest reading here was ‘of the queen’s favour. Curséd fortune!’

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