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SOME AMERICAN ADAPTATIONS
of the
KING ARTHUR TRADITION

by

Irene Berg

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State University of Montana
1930

Approved:

[Signatures]

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I.

Introduction

The opinion of Sidney Lanier, that "we may fairly trace the growth of English civilization by comparing with the earli- est conceptions of King Arthur the latest ideal of him in our literature given us by our own great master Tennyson,"\(^1\) if followed the length of its implications, offers significant research in the development of popular literature. Furthermore, perhaps no other cycle story could furnish so rich a field for such a study, for from century to century it has interested people of English speaking classes and succeeded in embodying current social philosophy with primitive story interest.

A brief survey of British-Saxon history determines how nearly King Arthur is indeed the product of English, French and Celtic creative minds. The earliest extant mention of Arthur is found in the Historia Britonum of Nennius (800), in which is given only the information that Arthur, "dux bellorum," commanded the Britons in twelve successful battles and that his name was associated with "mirabilia" or wonders.\(^2\)

\(^{1}\) Lanier, Sidney, "Introduction" in The Boy's King Arthur, New York, 1895.
Arthur as a chivalrous hero of romance is a fictitious character, it being only a conjecture among scholars how the army officer of British and Roman descent ever became the leader of the world's most distinguished order of knighthood. It is of grave importance that his name is not even mentioned by Gildas, a contemporary historian. If we accept the possible reasons for the omission of Gildas on the grounds that he was sparing in the use of great names and that he was influenced by a party quarrel in which Arthur supposedly killed the brother to the historian, it still must be admitted that Arthur's name was not an essential part of his country's history. Upon a basis of such meager information as was known concerning the existence of Arthur, the English people within a few hundred years developed so great a hero-worship and respect that though "Arthur was really vanquished and carried off by the Cat (of Losanne) --- one durst not tell that tale before Britons." After the passing of a thousand years, Nennius, in whose work alone appears the historical Arthur, is not read for Arthurian background; legend, chronicle, and romance have been the sources for English and American writers.

By the twelfth century the fabulous kingship of Arthur, which was medieval in conception, was so thoroughly accepted

3. Ibid., 32.
4. Ibid., 24-27.
that his renown had pervaded not only England, Wales, Ireland, France, but Italy also, whereas the historical Arthur, the early English military leader, had been entirely submerged. The period between Geoffrey of Monmouth and Malory was rich in creative Arthurian lore, and in that period flourished a civilization far different from any life known by the sixth century Arthur. He was moulded so thoroughly in this fabulous manner that had not scrupulous historians done their work so well, we might not hesitate now in accepting a bed with "white sheets and soft pillows" for a contemporary of Arthur and might not wonder whence came the gorgeous "watered silk" and the intricate styles of Guenevere's gowns. Middle Age interpretation has been so dominating that it has become characteristic in Arthurian treatment, any adaptation of before or after being a conspicuous deviation.

The Middle Age singer, who created this lore, was interested in his story-telling as an art, which meant that he accomplished only half his purpose if his story was not accepted by his audience. To the best teller belonged the tale. The Arthurian stories of this period are overflowing with adaptations to current standards in literature. As to the consciousness of

7. The dates of the Histories of the Kings of Britain and the Morte Darthur are 1135 and 1470 respectively.
style, there are the lengthy, tedious enumerations of the Mabinogion; the implicit faith in religious forms, well exemplified in the Holy Grail traditions; the trust in magic which has made Merlin and Morgan le Fay timeless in their appeal to the love of mystery and adventure; the naive brag-gadocio of heroes who could cross sword bridges or draw their lips over their heads for caps. The pride in riches and furs and jewels, and the use of animal stories to emphasize morals also characterize the medieval mind, and Arthur's command to his companions to tell stories while he sleeps is as dated as any other of the peculiar incidents. This medieval conception of Arthur and his knights, which even the present day considers original tradition, is thoroughly rooted in Middle Age social ideas. The first appearance of Lancelot answered the demands of courtly love that every married woman of distinction must have a lover.

de Troyes, as might be expected, definitely recognized the existence of courtly love in terms at that time prevalent among romancers: "The eyes, which are the entranceway of love, and which carry messages to the heart, take satisfaction in the glance, for they rejoice in all they see." The justice of trial by combat is no less conspicuous, for in many instances dramatic interest hangs upon external conflict of good and evil. That the story teller takes advantage of this popular justice is readily seen in narrative in which not supernatural but confessed human craft is the determining factor. Again and again Lancelot, strongest knight of the court, convinces society of Guenevere's innocence by his victories in the lists, and yet the teller of the tale even circles the point of the story to let the audience know of her guilt. Having been developed with the romances, knighthood itself is an innovated addition, for knighthood did not exist in England before the Norman Conquest, five centuries later than the supposed date of Arthur's existence.

From wide reading in Middle Age Arthurian sources, one discovers that when common tradition chose a favorite, the Mabinogion featured Arthur; when history, through lack of chronological facts, needed a good story, Geoffrey of Monmouth and

18. See, for example, Lancelot.
19. The Round Table is first mentioned by Wace, See Garteen, S. Humphreys, The Arthurian Epic, N.Y., 1895, Ch. IV and V.
Wace and Layamon appreciated the value of a hero to whom otherwise inexplicable feats could be attributed; when romance created abstractions of love, chivalry and religion, Arthur was the hero upon whom fell the imagination and favor of Chretien de Troyes and Malory. Arthur as Arthur is a sixth century barbarian; Arthur as a social or philosophical interest became "what you will."20

The example set by medieval storytellers, who invented as well as told, established a precedent in the handling of Arthurian tradition, for the freedom with which they made adaptations has given modern authors license to improvise the Round Table material as they wish. Among modern tradition makers are three Americans who, creating marked objectives, have adapted the Arthurian cycle to their personal themes. It is the object of this paper to show how each of these three Americans has used popular material to express an individual purpose, to show how one group of characters and situations can be of ethical, social, or philosophical importance, depending entirely upon the point of view from which it is considered. An analysis shows that Sidney Lanier's problem was to utilize ethical implications of medieval romance, that Richard Hovey, chiefly concerned with social

20. It is interesting to follow individual episodes, such as the first battle with the Romans or the triumph of Uther over Garlois, through Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Layamon. What is added by imagination and by poetic art is readily seen.
organization, needed as his laboratory a ready made story of organization, and that Edwin Arlington Robinson, finding the meaning of life to lie within the individual, viewed the Arthurian material through the interpretation of character, his problem being an expression of modern morality.
II.

SIDNEY LANIER

No small part of the responsibility for American's comprehension of the King Arthur tradition must be conceded to Sidney Lanier, whose services to medieval literature, it is estimated, are equal to Hawthorne's contribution to Greek mythology - he embedded it in the consciousness of American children. 21 Lanier's Boy's King Arthur was thought by its author to be merely a by-product of his literary accomplishments. Near the end of life worn out by poverty, ill health, and unsatisfied ambitions, this poet of the New South regretted the "bitterness of having to spend my time in making - boy's books - pot-boilers all - when a thousand songs are singing in my heart that will certainly kill me if I do not utter them soon." 22 The few songs which could find expression mean more to America in 1930 than they meant in 1882, it is certain; but the pot-boilers have always been "surely good stories" for American boys and girls.

Lanier's "native knightly grace," 23 supplemented by unrestrained indulgence in the reading of romantic literature, had its effects upon his literary accomplishments, for, endowed with the chivalric heritage of the Old South, Lanier

had absorbed the tales of the Round Table similarly as Sir Walter Raleigh grew to manhood breathing enthusiasm for the search for El Dorado. Paul Hamilton Hayne, an interested personal and literary friend, attached much importance to the fact that Lanier had "steeped his imagination from boyhood in the writings of the earlier English annalists and poets - Geoffrey of Monmouth, Sir Thomas Malory, Gower, and Chaucer." Since "especially he loved the tales of chivalry," his preparation to write with information on the Arthurian material is traceable to the influence of this romantic literature.

At a time when "Santa Claus brought him a small yellow one-keyed flageolet-like flute," his boyish fancy was leading him on brilliant adventures with Gil Blas and Don Quixote, his interest being divided between music and literature even at that early age. That his imagination responded to the feats of his medieval heroes is evidenced in his being captain of a boy's military company "as a result of Froissart and Chronicles of English Bowmen." It is in the broadest sense that "when the opportunity came" he was "fully equipped as an interpreter of Froissart and King Arthur for the benefit of our younger generation of students."

27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
Fortunately for that younger generation, Lanier had one of the personalities that never outgrows the enthusiasms of boyhood. The scenes shifted from the woods and marsh, "where grew the biggest haws and could be found the brightest arrowheads of quartz or flint" to the practical activities of Baltimore, where the one-keyed flute became a professional's instrument, and the poet-musician was engaged in a battle for food and health and career. And yet ill and poverty-discouraged, he could exclaim: "Such days and nights of glory as I have had! I have been studying Early English, Middle English, and Elizabethan poetry from Beowulf to Ben Jonson, and the world seems twice as large." He was still living in a world which he had known in boyhood. The "bow and arrow" period of his life having passed, chivalry now became a symphony demanding the rights of manhood as supreme; romance was significant with symbolism.

Much time is run, and man hath changed his ways,
Since Nature, in the antique fable-days,
Was hid from man's true love by proxy fays,
False fauns and rascal gods that stole her praise.
The nymphs, cold creatures of man's colder brain,
Chilled Nature's streams till man's warm heart was fain
Never to lave its love in them again.
Later, a sweet Voice Love thy neighbor said;
Then first the bounds of neighborhood outspread
Beyond all confines of old ethnic dread.

30. Lanier, Clifford, Reminiscences.
31. Mims, Edwin, Sidney Lanier, Cambridge, 1905, Ch. VI.
33. See "The Symphony", in Poems of Sidney Lanier, N.Y., 1896.
In his mature appreciation it is, therefore, only natural that the "thru all Lanier's productions we trace the influence of his early literary loves,"\textsuperscript{24} "he was more thoroughly at home in the Elizabethan age,"\textsuperscript{35} For he sensed a romance in that period which was poignant with manliness. And so, while "he reveled in its myriad-mindedness - its adventures and exploits, its chivalry and romance,"\textsuperscript{36} he could write with the taste of a thinking adult: "It was then as it is now, that the bravest are the tenderest ---- Stout and fine Sir Walter Raleigh pushes over to America, quite as ready to sigh a sonnet as to plant a colony."\textsuperscript{37}

Basing our judgement upon his criticisms, we may assume that chivalric literature engrossed Lanier's attention because he saw in its fascination a fundamental greatness. Feeling its power, he had wanted to write a great poem in which "Trade arose, and overthrew Chivalry" but the climax of which would feature the time when the "gentleman --- must rise and overthrow Trade."\textsuperscript{38} Old literature was for him a medium of interpretation. For the chivalric age could be any age, it being "marvellously untrue" that "romance is dead."\textsuperscript{39} But, while admiring the combined strength and gentility found in Elizabethan authors, he observed "there is certainly little

\textsuperscript{24} Paul Hamilton Hayne in \textit{Letters}, p. 220.
\textsuperscript{25} Mims, \textit{Lanier}, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 218.
\textsuperscript{27} Lanier, Sidney, \textit{Shakespeare and His Forerunners}, N.Y. 1908, Vol. I, P. 168
\textsuperscript{28} See Mims, \textit{Lanier}, F. 158.
\textsuperscript{29} Quoted from Mims, \textit{Lanier}, p. 311
in our present art of words to show lineage running back to the same ancestry .... We can neither deny the fact nor the strangeness of it, that the English poetry written between the time of Aldhelm and Caedman in the seventh century and that of Chaucer in the fourteenth, has never yet taken its place by the hearths and in the hearts of the people whose strongest prayers are couched in its idioms. It is not found...on the floors of our children's playrooms; there are no illustrated boy's editions of it; it is not on the booksellers counters at Christmas; it is not studied in our common schools; it is not printed by our publishers; it does not lie even in the dusty corners of our bookcases....Every boy...can give some account of the death of Hector; but how many boys - or, not to mince matters, how many men - in America could do more than stare if asked to relate the death of Brythonath?" 40

His ideals were not parlor philosophies, as the vigor with which he set about to remedy the situation amply shows.

The task of bringing romantic literature to a definite place in America was a gigantic one to be undertaken by a person without the advantage of time for scholarly study and at a time before the enthusiasm for research into early literature had been felt by scholars. But since "to him the study of it (literature) was a passion, and the creation of it the highest vocation of man"41 he had by nature excellent equipment for what he purposed.42 He had the commanding zest for original work. The prefaces to his boy's books show a knowledge of early literature, and they also show that he was a pioneer in the field.43

41. Mims, Lanier, p. 298.
42. Ibid, 241.
43. For example, Lanier did not believe in the historic existence of Arthur.
However, the Boy’s King Arthur was not intended to be a monument to scholarship. Lanier’s choice of authors alone shows that he looked for more in reading than a satisfying of curiosity as to the history of chivalric literature, for he appreciated favorite treatments of romance. He paid Morte Darthur the tribute of being “one of the sweetest and strongest books in our language.”44 Morte Darthur was significant to him in the facts “(1) that this book is an English classic written in the fifteenth century; (2) that it is the very first piece of melodious English prose ever written .... (3) that it arrays a number of the most splendid ideals of energetic manhood in all literature; and (4) that the stories which it brings together and arranges, for the first time, have furnished themes for the thought, the talk, the poems, the operas of the most civilized peoples of the earth during more than seven hundred years.”45 Having a sure appreciation for idealism and melody, Lanier admired Tennyson, “largest voice since Milton, yet some register of wit wanting.”46 In college days Tennyson’s poetry was “a treasured volume,”47 and Lanier saw in him a “good philosopher.”48 The most telling evidence of discrimination was his attempt to compose music for Tennyson’s short poems, Elaine’s “Song of Love and Death” from the Idylls

45. Mims, Lanier, p. 327 ff.
47. Quoted from Baskervill, Southern Writers, p. 149.
of the King being a favorite. 49

The question, "Why have we no nursery songs of Beowulf and the Grendel?" 50 suggests one purpose of Lanier in editing the boy's books; yet Madame Blanc 51 saw a more subtle reason for his choice of subject; "He thus made an intelligent selection both from our old French chronicles and from the Gaelic legends of the Round Table ostensibly for children, but really with the main design of propagating in American those chivalrous principles which are indispensible in all times and countries." 52 If her judgment is correct, romance was to Lanier a means, not an end; as much interested as he was in Beowulf and Lancelot, he was still more interested in a chivalry of living. Fortunately it is not necessary to take the word of Madame Blanc or that of any other of his friends - Lanier's theory of art combats any opinion leading one to believe his choice of subject matter had no purpose beyond the responding of the urge to contribute to scholarship. "We are all striving for one end, and that is to develop and ennoble the humanity of which we form a part." 53 Art was sacred; 54 it had a purpose, and its purpose was moral. "The greatest

49. Lanier, Clifford, Reminiscences.
51. For Lanier's friendships and his personal influence see Mims, Lanier, p. 304 ff.
53. Quoted from Mims, Lanier, p. 330.
work has always gone hand in hand with the most fervent moral purpose. He wanted American boys to know and attain manhood and he went about in the most direct way to teach them. For he had faith in teaching morals; he was a "teacher of ethics," being "always anxious to take everyone with him into the kingdom of beauty." With infinite patience, he worked as one whose heart served art only, for "any bitterness is...small and unworthy of a poet." Expecting no great recognition or reward, able to be happy without them, he saw his opportunity to teach boys that gentlemen are still gentlemen.

In the introduction to the boys' books, the editor speaks for himself. Lanier's constant recurring to the work of Malory, even in his introduction to Froissart, is indicative of the influence exercised upon him by the Arthurian cycle, Froissart wrote of a period when "war is becoming a trade," but Malory's chivalry, two centuries older, represented knighthood in the flourish of all its real and imagined glory. It is Malory who voices purpose of chivalric literature which is echoed by Lanier: "for herein may be seen chivalry, curtase, humanie, frendlynnesse, hardynesse, love, frendshyp, cowardyse, murdre,

57. Ibid, 137.
60. Froissart, "Introduction."
61. Froissart, "Introduction."
hate, vertue, synne. Doo after the good, and leve the evil, and it shall bring you to good fame and renommee."62

As the "Sir Galahad of American Literature,"63 Lanier knew how to give heroic tales significance as romance in a present-day America. He leaves no doubt in the minds of boys as to what he considers present-day knighthood to be. After reminding them that they will never win distinction by fighting with sword and armor, he shows them that their knighthood will be tested by conduct: "the strict payment of debts; the utmost delicacy in national honor; the greatest openness of party discussion, and the most respectful courtesy toward political opponents; the purity of the ballot-box; the sacred and liberal guarantee of all rights to all citizens; the holiness of marriage; the lofty contempt for what is small, knowing, and gossipy; and the like."64 He refers them to the "majestic manhood" of Lancelot, to the "grave and lordly reasonableness," and to his loyalty to his king.65

Lanier's consciousness of writing for boy readers is evidenced by the omissions of entire episodes in the sources which he follows and by his bracketed explanations. The familiar story of Guenevere's abduction by Meliagrance serves as a typical illustration of the great care taken to put moral

62. Quoted by Lanier, Froissart, "Introduction."
64. Froissart, "Introduction."
65. Boy's King Arthur, "Introduction."
examples before American boys. Being influenced by the romantic writers whom he followed, Malory tells the story with many details, giving a description of the injuring of Lancelot's hand, which later gives Meliagrace opportunity to accuse Guenevere of being unfaithful to Arthur. The love between Lanier's Lancelot and Guenevere is quite platonic. He tells the abduction story and makes a feature of Lancelot's bravery in the rescue and in his defending her from the flames. The episode of her faithlessness is summed up in the following manner by Lanier: "And then while they abode in that castle Sir Meliagrance appealed the queen of treason, and Sir Lancelot offered himself to do battle with Sir Meliagrance in the queen's right."

Lanier's appraisal of individual characters of romance proves his skill as both critic and prophet. He chose as representative of their cycle King Arthur, Lancelot, Guenevere, Tristram, Isolde, Merlin, Gawaine, the Lady of the Lake, Galahad, and time has shown these to be the basis of America's interest in the Arthurian romances. To be sure, there is Modred and Dagonet and Pellinore, but their names have not become household possessions. Again, present day interpretation is very similar to that made by Lanier in a catalog in an introduction;"...Of lordly Sir Lancelot, of generous Sir Tristram,
of stainless Sir Galahad, of gentle Sir Percival, of meek Sir
Gareth of Orkney, of brilliant Sir Palamides the Saracen, of
dolorous Sir Balin and Sir Balan, of perservering Sir le Cote
Mal Taile, of hilarious Sir Dinadan...of cowardly Sir Mark, of
traitorous Sir Mordred, and of Wicked Morgan le Fay...."69
After all, Lanier could speak of King Arthur with an assurance
which carries his reader with him.

69. Boy's King Arthur, "Introduction."
Richard Hovey, made conspicuous among American poets by his attempt to make extensive original contribution to the King Arthur tradition, was primarily interested in men and women as parts of society. He is a poet of the earth, a poet who has faith in men's conduct toward one another so long as that conduct flows from spontaneity, but who is not in sympathy with dominance imposed by worn out institutions. "He forgot dogmas in insights, and life in the pure visions born of the impulses of a high and illumined heart."70 He would, like Lanier, find in mankind symphony. Hovey's interpretations of action are necessarily concerned, therefore, with man in his relation to men or society.

In criticising man's relationship to society, Hovey would of necessity deal with the Arthur material as a group story. Launcelot is of importance only insomuch as he is a member of the Round Table. "Under the story in the 'Poem in Dramas' lies embodied a thought of life, a dramatic presentation of the whole social and political structure—the individual, the family, the state."71 Any comparison of Hovey's 'Poem in Dramas' with other Arthurian treatments must be on the basis of

70. Hovey, Richard, The Holy Graal, N. Y., 1907, Notes by Mrs. Hovey.
71. Ibid, "Introduction," by Mrs. Hovey, p. 16.
epic value, for in his making the cycle center around Laun-celot and Guenevere he has had to make deviations from the usual handling and is willing to disregard his authorities in matters of plot, the most obvious change being the usurpation by Launcelot of the importance of Gawaine, who is a mere child, in the story of the Roman war. For this reason any such comparison is difficult, for of the nine dramas which he included in his prospectus only four were written, and had the author had opportunity to complete the cycle, he might have revised the ones already finished. Therefore, to get a comprehensive idea of what he has accomplished, it is necessary to judge the four dramas and the five brief fragments with a knowledge of their purpose and intended significance.

The choice of chivalric literature for a study of society is very appropriate; the closely knit order of knighthood, exemplified in the popular Round Table, offers excellent study of the individual's relation to his state. The 'Poem in Dramas' is so much concerned with this relation that the central character is the "social system of the age." The leader of this order, Arthur, "more king than himself," lives first of all in the state:

72. Ibid, notes by Mrs. Hovey, p. 60-61.
73. Quoted from Introduction, Mrs. Hovey, p. 17.
Is it true, Launcelot?
Was there no thought of me or my great dream
To build the perfect State (whereto ye all
Were bound with a great oath) - did naught of this
Speak for in your heart? Heaven may be served
In many ways. I trust I serve no less,
Who would extend God's justice and knit close
The solid race, than they that seek new ways
To bring the grace of heaven into our hearts.
Even to do good, will you forsake that good
Wherefore your hands are set? 74

The theme naturally places Launcelot and Guenevere on the one
side and Arthur on the other. "To Launcelot right was above
the law. To Arthur the law was above any view of right or
wrong." 75 Arthur lived in the Round Table. Launcelot lived
in love for Guenevere. To Launcelot "there was but one crime
to be done in the name of love, and that was love itself." 76
One side is extremely individual and the other extremely
social; there will be conflict, since

Man cannot live unto himself alone,
But every deed returns upon the doer
A thousandfold. 77

With the problem of all society upon his mind, it is small
wonder that Hovey found the Arthur story to be very complicated.

From the schema and commentary left among Hovey's notes, 78
it is possible to know what plans the author had for the complete
"Launcelot and Guenevere." The series, as he contemplated them,

75. The Holy Graal, Notes on King Arthur, Mrs. Hovey, p. 111.
76. Ibid, 112.
77. The Holy Graal, Act II, Sc. 3, p. 47.
consists of nine individual parts to be presented in the following order: The Quest of Merlin, a masque; The Marriage of Guenevere, a tragedy; The Birth of Galahad, a romantic drama; Taliesin, a masque; The Graal, a tragedy; Astolot, and idyllic drama; Fata Morgana, a masque; Morte D'Arthur, tragedy; Avalon, a harmonody. Group one, The Quest of Merlin, The Marriage of Guenevere, The Birth of Galahad, dealing with the growing power of the Round Table, shows Launcelot and Guenevere attempting "to set their relation to each other above their relation to the world." The issue is tragic. The second group, Taliesin, The Graal, Astolot, dealing with the height of the power of the Round Table, shows an attempt "to set their relation to the world above their relation to each other." The issue is equally tragic. The third part, Fata Morgana, Morte D'Arthur, Avalon, dealing with the fall of the Round Table, shows the reconciliation of individual and society. In the respective order, the masques suggest the philosophical, the aesthetic, and the ethical drifts of the poems.

The task which Hovey set for himself was prodigious. The treatment is novel, involving an original handling of material, for feudalistic loyalty to the Round Table had been taken for granted by previous writers. True, other conceptions have shown the institution to have failed, but its failure came through mismanagement on the part of its leaders, not through
a questioning of its right to exist. In choosing so vast and so different an adaptation, Hovey saw fit not only to use Malory as a basis, preferring many details from other sources, but also to use the "privilege to alter and invent largely for himself." 79

"It was the inward significance of the old tale...that formed its supreme value in his consideration." 80 He saw fit to consider the Launcelot-Guenevere situation the "central drama, about which the other legends of the Arthurian cycle are grouped" 81 - a conception very different from the earlier tradition, since Launcelot, not appearing in chronic or popular legend, is an innovation of romance. 82 But to present his theme he needed a "modern instance stripped of modern dress" 83 and he wished to get away from the modern setting for his drama, so that the exposition of his ideas might not be confused by the baffling counter interest of contemporary realism." 84 In the "Poem in Dramas", the lovers are the central figures. "Launcelot and Guenevere are placed in a position where they must either sacrifice the existing order of things to themselves or themselves to the existing order of things." 85

It is for this reason that marriage is the institution

80. The Holy Graal, "Preface" by Bliss Carman, p. 8
82. Maynadier, Ch. VII.
attacked, and for his position Hovey has been severely
criticised.  

A close study, however, reveals that Hovey
was not attacking marriage as being wrong in itself, but for
the injustice which it, as a fixed institution, may inflict
upon the individual. Coming nearer to the point, it may be
said that Hovey had no quarrel with marriage, but that he was
an enemy to all which hindered the noblest fulfillment of love.
"The ever-growing beauty of love was a central theme in the
'Poem in Dramas'." Mrs. Hovey has defined the poet's ideal
of love: "Our present ideal of love has come to include -
on the physical plane - sensation, sympathy, instinct; then
sentiment, adoration, intuition in the emotions; and judgment
and conscience as the results of reason."  

Hovey placed much
emphasis upon the fact that such love only could be fulfilled
in perfection, Galahad:

In him ye shall behold how light can look
on darkness and forgive,
How love can walk in the mire and take no stain
therefrom.  

Galahad was chosen, because in him can be exemplified the
thought of our own time what the Galahad of the Middle Ages
meant to chivalry and Christian thought.  But this is a new

86. Hale, Edward E., "For the Stage or the Study", in The
Dial, No. 26 (1899) p. 17-19.
87. The Holy Graal, Note p. 112.
88. Ibid, 62.
89. Hovey, Richard, Taliesin, Boston, 1900, p. 52.
Galahad; in creating him Hovey had to make improvisations in the story of his birth and in Guenevere's reactions to her place in society, which represents the position of women.

Excepting Tennyson, who had Launcelot's reputation at heart, the major writers of Arthurian tradition have made Galahad the son of Launcelot and Elaine the White, daughter of King Pellias. Hovey's story of the motherhood of Guenevere and the agreement with Elaine to be foster mother is an innovation befitting the theme of the dramas, for Galahad, the knight of purity, could not have been created through any "ascetic or otherwise morbid ideal of life," which would have been the case had he been the son of Elaine. In the old story, it was a bewitched Launcelot who was the father of Elaine's son, and such a Launcelot "could give only a body, not a soul, to the child Galahad"; and in the old story Galahad's mother was a woman whose emotional life had been abnormally suppressed by a fanatical father. In Hovey's account, Galahad, being superior, must be the son of superiority.

91. "Sister or brother none had he; but some
Call'd him a son of Lancelot, and some said
Begotten by enchantment - chatterers they,
Like birds of passage piping up and down,
That gape for flies - we know not whence they come;
For when was Lancelot wanderingly lewd?"
Tennyson: The Holy Grail

92. The Holy Grail, Notes, p. 57.
I behold this child
Grown to a man; the armor that he bears
Is silvery pale; he stands among the knights
Like a white birch among grim-visaged pines;
He is like a moon-lit pillar in the night;
And angels float unseen above his head,
Bearing the Holy Graal.94

As the mother of Galahad, Guenevere is not the queen of
chivalric renown. She is more than a beautiful woman.
Guenevere has always been more or less a popular tradition
heroine, and yet she is, nevertheless, the first truly human
woman in English literature,95 and Hovey has played upon this
individuality. Far from conventional, Hovey's Guenevere is the
out-door woman who has learned from nature, not from custom:

God sent a blessed angel to my aid,
There on the peak beyond the gulf I saw her,
Standing against the sky, with garments blown,
The mistress of the winds! An angel, said I?
God was more kind, he sent a woman to me.

But she went on

Alone across the summits of the hills
Like some grand free Diana of the North
And passed out of my sight, as daylight fades
Out of the western sky. But I no more
Was faint, and went my way, considering.96

Other lines from the same play prepare us for a clash of
individual and institution:

94. Hovey, Richard, The Birth of Galahad, Boston, 1900,
   Act I, sc. 3, p. 31.
95. See the New International Encyclopaedia, "Guenevere."
96. Hovey, Richard, The Marriage of Guenevere, N. Y.,
Wild as the sea-mew, restless of restraint,
She roams the jutting capes of Cameliard,
Like some strange dweller of the mountain winds,
Half kelpie and half woman. The highlander,
Chasing the roe o'er cliff and chasm, has often
Seen her lithe form rise from the treeless crag
Like smoke from a hunter's fire, and crossed himself,
Thinking he saw a creature not of earth.

She openly rebels against the conventions of womanhood:

Why, what a thing is woman! She is brought
Into the world unwelcome. The mother weeps
That she has borne a daughter to endure
A woman's fate. The father knits his brows
And mutters "Pish, 'tis but a girl!"

........................

She must be quiet,
Demure - not have her freedom with the boys.
While they are running on the battlements,
Playing at war or at the chase, she sits
Eating her heart out at embroidery frames
Among old dames that chatter of a world
Where women are put up as merchandise
- Oh, I have slipped away a thousand times
Into the garden close and scaled the wall
And fled from them to freedom and the hills.
And I have passed the women in the fields,
With stupid faces dulled by long constraint,
Bowing their backs beneath the double burden
Of labor and unkindness - all alike,
Princess and peasant, bondslaves, by their sex! 98

The Guenevere of Malory, being so thoroughly engrossed in
her own situation that she falls an easy victim to jealousy,
is satisfied in her relation with Launcelot, and conventions,
so long as they do not entangle her, mean nothing; the
Guenevere of Hovey seeks a development, a broadening - she
must give as well as receive:

97. Ibid, Act I, sc. 3, p. 27.
98. Ibid, 32-34.
Life and custom close us in
Between such granite walls of circumstance
That, when we choose, it is not as we would
But between courses where each likes us not. 99

Not content with freeing woman in the choice of her husband, Hovey believed there was still something for our day to demand - "power of purity in the relation of her body to the emotions, even when that freedom clashed with her established relation to the social whole, that is, the relation through husband." 100 And Guenevere, not recognizing marriage to be the master of her soul "only loves——never sins——never repents." 101 It is for this reason that she, instead of Elaine, is the mother of Galahad.

The "Poem in Dramas" represents the conflict which always results when individual and social interests are not in harmony. The Quest of Merlin, with a medley of pagan and Christian ethereal characters, suggests the philosophical trend of the series, having the setting in Avalon and implying that the end of the story will be there also. Hovey here has taken a step into new territory, for he tells us that Merlin learned through Argante, the Lady of the Lake, that the marriage of Arthur and Guenevere would be unsuccessful; Geoffrey of Monmouth, and other chroniclers, for example, give a fantastic account of Merlin's birth and childhood and make no further

100. The Holy Graal, "Introduction", p. 15.
Attempt to explain the sources of Merlin's knowledge. The other plays of the first group, showing sacrifice of individual to state, The Marriage of Guenevere and The Birth of Galahad, directly follow the prophecy of the Quest of Merlin.

The Marriage of Guenevere opens with Guenevere, the "restless of restraint," making a marriage which will have the least consideration for personal freedom. She is now entangled in an order established by Merlin, who considers a queen the possession of the state:

And in the top
Of this great arch of empire you are set
A keystone, that it may not fall, when Arthur
And I take our supporting hands away.
Your destiny is glorious, to be
Mother of kings and mother of a realm.

There being an independence in her spirit, she unblindedly accepts what it is not her lot to choose. In womanhood, as in girlhood, she is unafraid of circumstance.

She frightened the nurses more with her strange thoughts
Than ever they her with bogies.

Even when she discovers the love between herself and Launcelot, she is not yet ready to admit that custom could defeat her. Launcelot is unable to follow her intuitive self-assurance.

103. Ibid., 27.
They departed, she with head
Erect, poised firmly on her royal throat. 104.
But he with wisedyes and a haggard face. 104.

Launcelot, because he is more actively concerned in the affairs
of state, is the first to realize the impossibility of their
situation. He is passionately in love with the wife of the
man to whom he is in honor bound. When he asks the question,
as if to himself,

Is't possible that I betray the King? 105

Bors, like his conscience, answers,

But thou art noble and wilt not forget
Thy triple duty, God, the King, thy friend. 106

There is irony in the fact that what Launcelot wants most,
which is denied him, is only secondary in Arthur's life.

You, Merlin, know full well
The unity of Britain is the heart and purpose
of my life. 107.

Guenevere finally understands that the social group cannot be
ignored:

Oh, what a tangled anarchy is life!
If the rash Will strive in the helter-skelter
To weave for itself a little ordered space,
Its skillless touch pulls unexpected threads
That tighten to 'ts own strangling. 108

Launcelot has the world; Guenevere's heritage is the family,
which society denies her.

104. Ibid, Act IV, sc 3, p. 113.
105. Ibid, Act II, sc.2, p. 34.
106. Ibid, 55.
The family alone
Is woman's, it alone is her protection,
Her mission and her opportunity.\(^{109}\)

Though they were convinced in conscience that
Though the priests be the channels of God's grace,
Yet otherwise they are but men.\(^{110}\)

The realization of tragedy is no less keen.

To the souls in hell
It is at least permitted to cry out.\(^{111}\)

In *The Birth of Galahad*, Launcelot and Guenevere continue to place their love first, though they have come to temper their own lives to the existing order. Guenevere is learning what it means to be in conflict with a force more fixed than she:

Oh, to be free! to stab
This turnkey Policy, break prison, flee,
Untrammelled, fearless, irresponsible -
And let tongues wag that will!\(^{112}\)

She is no longer indifferent, as she was when she could believe, before knowing Launcelot,

Life is to be supported, not enjoyed.\(^{113}\)

And she is no longer defiant, as when she had said,

Come, Launcelot, I shall keep you at my side
Even more than hitherto, that men may know
That what I do is not for them to question.\(^{114}\)

\(^{109}\) Ibid. 148.
\(^{110}\) Ibid. 149.
\(^{111}\) Ibid. 171.
\(^{113}\) *The Marriage of Guenevere*: Act I, sc. 3, p. 40.
\(^{114}\) Ibid. Act IV, sc. 3, p. 128.
She is forced to a reconciliation. The glory of her triumph in the birth of Galahad is equalled in the tragedy of being denied a motherhood:

    God, is it no sacrifice
    I lay upon thy dark and shadowy altar?
    Never to call him son, never to feel
    His little arms about my neck, never
    To hear his waking spirit turn to mine
    Its dear unfolding loves—and now, even now
    To leave him!—I shall watch him from afar;
    His glory will be trumpets in my heart;
    But the great gulfs of silence are between us.
    You dark remorseless creditors that exact
    Our debts with usury, is it not enough?—115

Launcelot, too, is forced to compromise. On the one hand is Guenevere, the mother of Galahad, and on the other is the state; between these two is Arthur, who

    Even if he
    Were judge of his own sons as Brutus was,
    Holds the integrity of the ordered state
    So high above the individual life
    He would not flinch one comma of the law.116

The one attempt Launcelot can make to reconcile his position is

    To set the Caesar's crown upon his (Arthur's) head!
    To make it up to him!117

A double interest has made his choice of action precarious:

    Could he be a traitor,—
    As he will not,— I'd know that it must be
    From truth to a higher cause.118

In order to emphasize the intensity of his position, Hovey saw fit to give Launcelot unprecedented importance in the management

118. Ibid, Act IV, p. 90.
of the Roman war and to invent numerous scenes. This outstanding position makes very evident the fact that in The Birth of Galahad as in The Marriage of Guenevere, Launcelot and Guenevere make a failure of setting the individual above the state.

In the second group, Taliesin, The Graal, Astolot, Hovey was to have shown an equally tragic issue in placing the state above the individual. Of these, only Taliesin is complete, and though it reflects much credit upon Hovey's skill in versification, it is not a pertinent addition to the Arthurian tradition, for it holds no intriguing interpretations. Its relation to the second part of the series is identical with the relation of The Quest of Merlin to the first part, each foreshadowing the events of the two plays following. Furthermore, Taliesin gives the aesthetic drift of the "Poem in Dramas".

Hovey has given Taliesin unprecedented significance in the Arthurian story, for in tradition he is not a member of the Round Table cycle. As a disciple of Merlin he is a new character. In appropriating him the poet makes a strong addition to the ethereal element of the play. The reader never forgets that the scene is in a world of fantasy, and without Percival and King Evelac would be entirely lost. In

King Evelac's advice to Percival there is a hint that Launcelot and Guenevere will be as unsuccessful in sacrificing the individual to the state as in placing the individual above the state.

*Better the rose of love out of the dung-hill of the world's adulteries
Than the maid icicle that keeps itself from stain of earth where no life is
In the aloof of splendors boreal. His own soul bars him from God's bliss,
Dwindling the sun to its own sterile sheen and freezing with transparencies.*120

The Graal, only a fragment of which was written, shows an attempt to concede personal interests to the welfare of the group by means of religion. Guenevere renounces love and reconcilest herself to Arthur, and in so doing she becomes part of the social machine, for Arthur sees in life only mechanism, his imagination being satisfied only with the time

*When the throne of Britain Shall have an heir to keep what we have won.*121

But Guenevere, who has been made to feel the tyranny of the group, cannot reconcile herself to being the mother of a new social order.

*Children? To bear him children! No, God strike me dead!*122

Launcelot's effort to deny the influence of Guenevere's love in his life is sincere, and the quest of the Graal becomes his

120. Taliesin, p. 51-52.
mission.

I would in all things
Submit myself to Holy Church as unto
God visible and audible on earth.123

The second trilogy ends with Astolot, which was to show
the problem of jealousy as an inevitable result in adapting
self to the group. Only twelve lines were written.

The third trilogy, too, is fragmentary. Fata Morgana,
which was to have given the ethical drift of the "Poem in
Dramas" is negligible in criticism, since it is too incomplete
to have value. Morte D'Arthur opens with the old story of
Modred's prevailing upon Arthur to allow a trap to be set for
Launcelot. The fragment ends with the keen point of conflict
expressed in the words of Launcelot:

Oh, Guenevere! -
Your bond to him is formal, mine is real
As - God in heaven! as real as mine to you.124

The last poem, Avalon, was to show complete reconciliation.
It is only in Avalon that there is peace, and the only entrance
is death.

Pray to the tranquil night to let the calm
of stars beneath the silent pale
Fall like a mighty hand upon thy spirit, even
like the hand of Death.125

Hovey's theme leads to the conclusion that approval by the vote
of the majority does not give unquestionable rights to the
state. In presenting the material, he, like his predecessors,

made fitting improvisations. He has not destroyed the
medieval love of chivalry and the love for the Round Table,
but he has made detailed addition. The dolorous, faithful
Calahault, the scenes in Rome, the boyhood of Gawaine, the
new character of Guenever - all these it was necessary to
create in order to present his thesis. Moreover, we are not
accustomed to associating with the Arthurian tradition the
presence of classic deities. Lyric spontaneity, too, is a
distinct characteristic of Hovey's treatment. Knowing his
love of earthly nature, we can easily understand why he takes
such care in describing every garden, every woodland. It
is to be expected that Guenever is as "wild as the sea-mew,"
that the child Borre discovers in looking out across the sea
that

The moon is bald
Like poor old Hugh the gardener. That's why
The water doesn't stick to it.\(^{126}\)

Hovey is greatly concerned in finding adjustments to life
because "it is to be enjoyed. Why else should God have made
the world so beautiful?"\(^{127}\)

\(^{126}\) The Marriage of Guenever, Act III, sc. 1. p. 72.
\(^{127}\) Ibid. Act I, sc. 3, p. 40.
Behind the three Arthurian poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson lies the theme of the individual's inward adjustment to life. These poems are not, like Hovey's Launcelot and Guenever, a story sequence marking a theory of social organization. The author, first to give us the new character poem now popular in America, sees men as individuals. He is not concerned with what the order of knighthood did to the world; he is interested in what Arthur, Lancelot, and Tristram each did to himself.

Sometimes I wonder if this be the world
We live in, or the world that lives in us.

It is "the world we live in" in that there is a governing fate stronger than the individual; it is "the world that lives in us" in that the individual wakes his own fate through a gradual development of character which becomes so strong that he himself cannot control it. To the world, or circumstances, or fate which the progress of time forces on him, man must adjust his inward life. Robinson, then, is not wishing, like Lanier, to show, through noble example, what men's conduct should be, for Lanier's morality is

concerned with social ethics, and Robinson's morality is the inward reaction of man's effort to adjust himself to the world in which he finds himself. Again, Robinson's morality, based on private adjustment, is not like Hovey's, for Hovey sees men only as individual parts of society.

Robinson gauged his peculiar abilities well when he chose to interpret the Arthurian romances. Its interpretation makes necessary a skilful presentation of a wide range of characters, a necessity which his mastery of "astringent character delineation" allows him to utilize to great advantage. There is as much importance in his choice from the point of view of content; for in a romantic and imaginative background he has leeway in interpretation. Without violating historical fact, he appropriates familiar scenes in which to move the actors who exemplify his theme of living: "The world is—a kind of spiritual kindergarten where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell 'God' with the wrong blocks." This statement is as clear cut as any of his famous "sharp epithets"—fewer or more words could not improve it, and never in his treatment of the King Arthur tradition does he leave it. He has not told whether he

believes these infants will ever find the right blocks. That is the problem for the reader; he is willing to go three-fourths of the way, but the reader must meet him. Looking at the poems analytically, the critic finds that Robinson ignored the traditional story interest and made the Arthurian material an expression, through character, of his own philosophy of life.

In its detachment from the story interest of the Arthurian tradition, the poem Merlin is, in the two centralizing forces, seer and court fool, taken from the plane of action and thoroughly rooted in that of thought. This poem, striking the note of a complete presentation of the cycle story, places much emphasis upon the philosophical interpretation of change, and in Merlin and Dagonet, the twentieth century thinker has opportunity to look at life, at a way of living, veritably from "Merlin's Rock."

It is in this role of philosopher that the poet's psychological powers are portrayed to the greatest advantage, for, in the first place, the character of Merlin, charming in an age of witchery and magic, represents an unsalable commodity in a period of skepticism and science. Although Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of the devil-begotten lad who confounded the wisdom of Vortigern's counsellors 133 tickles

the fancy of modern readers, none of whom would think of believing it, Robinson's Merlin is as inexplicable; and yet the interest lies not in Merlin's mystical other-world associations, not in magical powers, but in his uncanny ability to find a meaning for the world in which live men and women. Therefore, he is not objectionable to even the prosaic-minded, for his claim to distinction is intuitive prophecy, which is not concerned with scientific psychology.

Robinson's way of looking at life is consistently agnostic; yet his theme is certainly not carried to fanaticism. Throughout the three poems the point of view is so tempered with dignity and reserve that his entire treatment may be gauged.

An old song, not too merry or too sad.  
Since he himself cannot be sure what blocks would spell God, he is not expounding dogmatic theories. Although he is certain that we have not adjusted ourselves to our world that

If you see what's around us every day,  
You need no other showing to go mad.  
he will not take the responsibility of creating harmony:

This coil of Lancelot and Guenevere  
Is not for any mortal to undo,  
Or to deny, or to make otherwise...

This lack of extremes and this unwillingness to remake the

---

135. Ibid, 6.
136. Ibid, 37.
world may be a license to live in illusions:

Never do more when there's no more to do
And you may shun thereby the bitter taste
Of many disillusions and regrets. 137

But when change comes, as it inevitably comes,

We pay for dreams
In waking out of them--138

If there is any cynicism at all in the poems it is most
strongly shown in Tristram's loss of belief in men:

Would God foresee such folly alive as that
In anything he had made, and still make more?139

But Robinson has not said that the infants will never find
the right blocks. The world is not predestined to be
"no other than a stinking mess." 140 In the following
quotation it is implied that men control destinies:

Gawaine, you have the world
Now in your fingers---an uncommon toy.141

It is a responsibility which men may not know how to manage.

Gawaine, you may one day hold the world
Between your fingers, knowing not what it is
That you are holding.142

And again.

Tell me a story now about the world
And the men in it, and what they do in it
And why it is they do it all so badly.143.

137. Ibid, 74.
139. Ibid, 39.
141. Ibid, 145.
142. Ibid, 4.
143. Ibid, 114.
This incompetence is not criticised. The coil of Lancelot and Guenevere is not to be undone, but Lamorak does not feel that he himself could have avoided it; if he, instead of Lancelot, had been in love with Guenevere:

I'm not so ancient or so frozen certain
That I'd ride horses down to skeletons
If she were after me.\textsuperscript{144}

The poet is merely looking on, and he cannot allow Dagonet to say unchallenged,

I'm glad they tell me there's another world
For this one's a disease without a doctor.\textsuperscript{145}

Bedevere answers him:

No, not so bad as that---
The doctor, like ourselves, may now be learning.\textsuperscript{146}

In fact, man is himself "a groping thought of an eternal will,"\textsuperscript{147} which

strongly endowed

With merciful illusions whereby self
Becomes the will itself and each man swells
In fond accordance with his agency.\textsuperscript{148}

Man is free, then, to the extent that he is part of the God substance, but less than it. The eternal, being absolute, cannot grow - or, in the words of Bedevere, cannot "be learning" - so have opportunity to will and to make perfect potentialities, it created a world of itself and gave this

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 153.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 153-154.
world the thought which is the expression of will.\textsuperscript{149}

Therefore man, made of God, is limitless, or, expressed in the toying exclamation of Dagonet, through development man approaches God:

\begin{quote}
My fear is that I've been a groping thought
That never swelled far enough.\textsuperscript{150}
\end{quote}

The basis for man's freedom is also the basis for his lack of freedom; being part of a law he is controlled by his own being, the inevitable:

\begin{quote}
If I were the world's maker
I should say fate was mightier than I was.\textsuperscript{151}
\end{quote}

The poet's attitude is that of a Jove musing upon a revolving world at his feet, a moving world influenced by constant change. The world moves inevitably, and with change comes time and fate. In all three poems these fundamental notes are struck, but in Merlin they are blended in the destiny of a Camelot viewed from Merlin's Rock. If Arthur's world could have been saved, Merlin was the one to twirl it in his fingers in doing so, but Merlin denied having the ability:

\begin{quote}
But I was neither Fate nor God.\textsuperscript{152}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{149} Robinson's metaphysics suggests an interesting comparison with the system of Milton. See Sourat, Denis, \textit{Milton, Man and Thinker}, The Dial Press, 1925. Sec. II.

\textsuperscript{150} Merlin, p. 155.

\textsuperscript{151} Tristram, p. 199.

\textsuperscript{152} Merlin, p. 166.
Arthur, with "now a desperation more strong upon him than a woman's net"153 was to learn

That I (Merlin) am less than Fate.154

Merlin could not control even his own destiny:

But now he knew that his cold angel's name
Was Change, and that a mightier will than his
Or Vivien's had ordained that he be there.155

Even God is subject to Fate:

I saw too much when I saw Camelot:
And I saw farther backward into Time,
And forward, than a man may see and live,
When I made Arthur king. I saw too far,
But not so far as this. Fate played with me
As I have played with Time; and Time, like me,
Being less than Fate, will have on me his vengeance.
On Fate there is no vengeance, even for God.156

It being a fate too great to war against, Dagonet and Merlin, seeing the darkness falling and perhaps sympathizing with the opinion of Vivien,

I'll have no living remnant of the dead
Annoying me until it fades and sours
Of too long cherishing.157

had no desire to remain. That they could not redeem Camelot they knew.

We pay for going back; and all we get
Is one more needless ounce of weary wisdom
To bring away with us.158

154. Ibid, 54.
155. Ibid, 121.
156. Ibid, 133-134.
158. Ibid, 163.
So, with the coming of night, they left Camelot.

The problem of adjusting life to the inevitable change of Time is the centralizing theme of the Lancelot. In choosing this stage for the Lancelot-Guenevere presentation, Robinson has been strikingly unafraid of precedent; in the first place, this attitude echoes Malory's "And the most party of all England held with Sir Modred, the people were so new fangle,"159 and Tennyson's

The old order changeth, yielding place to new,

Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.160

but, on the other hand, he is forced into an unorthodox treatment of romantic love, for, in consistence with the change theory, even in love, bound or free, there is no dependable happiness. Emotionally the reader is prepared, in the closing lines of Merlin, for the death blow to romance;

Colder blew the wind
Across the world, and on it heavier lay
The shadow and the burden of the night;
And there was darkness over Camelot.161

The voicing of the philosophy of Change inevitably follows:

Who is this Lancelot that sees the Light
And waits now in the shadow for the dark?162

It is Lancelot who keenly feels the tragedy of change:

159. Morte Darthur, Bk. 21, Ch. 1.
160. The Passing of Arthur.
162. Lancelot, p. 383.
God, what rain of ashes falls on him
Who sees the new and cannot leave the old.\(^{163}\)

The implication is that old and new are irreconcilable,
which is indeed the truth in the love story of the poem.
Perhaps Robinson, like Hovey, could have entitled his three poems \textit{Lancelot and Guenevere}, for it is in them that the tragedy is fulfilled. It may be true that Robinson "had been taught by the failure of the romanticists to tame love's fervor;"\(^{164}\) at any rate, love is the force in which Change is exemplified. The Lancelot who, in spite of his exemplary influence in the kingdom of his friend the king, could hazard all for

\begin{quote}
The love of her who sat there in the shade,  
With oak leaves flashing in the golden light  
Over her face and over her golden hair.\(^{165}\)
\end{quote}

later discovers

\begin{quote}
All hours have an end.\(^{166}\)
\end{quote}

Both are characters of undoubted strength, and they go to their downfall unblinded, knowing themselves to be

\begin{quote}
At the mercy of a man (Gawaine)  
Who, if the stars went out, would only laugh.\(^{167}\)
\end{quote}

When the end of the "old life" comes with revelation and Arthur's undaunted, conscientious fulfillment of the law,

\(^{163}\) Ibid, 385.  
\(^{165}\) Lancelot, p. 371-372.  
\(^{166}\) Ibid, 417.  
\(^{167}\) Ibid, 372.
there is still no resentment to external forces. The time for change has come; Lancelot, because of the Vision, chose the new, for he would not be one

Who feed themselves
By grace of God, on hopes dryer than hay,
Enjoying not what they eat, yet always eating.
The Vision shattered, a man's love of living
Becomes at last a trap and a sad habit,
More like an ailing dotard's love of liquor
That ails him, than a man's right love of woman,
Or of his God. 168

Guenevere, for whom there was no vision, and who knew that for Lancelot their love was a past "then", chose the only course open to her, that of living in the "old." Since she can go neither back nor forward, she withdraws into the convent to avoid the solution of the change problem.

The tragedy comes in neither making a success of his choice, "not wholly led by one or lured by the other." 169

Though Lancelot's reason told him with assurance

A played out world,
Although that world be ours, had best be dead. 170

and the Voice tells him:

Where the Light falls, death falls; a world has died
For you that a world may live. There is no peace. 171

he emotionally lives in the past. Guenevere reminds him

169. Ibid, 415.
170. Ibid, 436.
171. Ibid, 449.
There is nothing now
That I can see between you and the Light
That I have dimmed so long. 172

And yet

---the world became

For Lancelot one wan face - Guenevere's face. 173

For a moment they could almost change places, and Lancelot, who had renounced the love of the queen for the Vision, tells her,

But when I found you here,
So different, so alone, I would have given
My soul to be a chattel and a gage
For dicing fiends to play for, could so doing
Have brought one summer back. 174

Guenevere, however, has learned that
We do not buy them back, even with our souls. 175

When Lancelot sees

---her cold white hands---falling,
Away from him like flowers into a grave. 176

the realization comes that he has placed himself in a world from which there was no return. He is forced, not willing, to discover that

---no man or woman bears forever
The burden of first days. There is no peace. 177

Fate, Time, and Change, with their echo, "There is no peace," vibrate through the structure of Tristram, Isolt,
watching at the sea for a ship from the north, sees the "same white birds flying, and always flying, and still flying," and with a wisdom beyond her eighteen years of life, has already formulated a philosophy of living:

I have been told so much about this world
That I have wondered why men stay in it.

At the end of two years, when she has become more than two years older, she has learned the truth of her father's words,

There are no mortal heroes
That are so providently barred and fastened
As to keep change and death from coming in.

The gentle King Hoel's advice that she must change was reasonably offered, but the reader, believing her true in saying she "would have been the world and heaven to Tristram, and was nothing to him," knows her thoughts will continue to be with the "same white birds flying, and always flying, and still flying."

The tragedy lies in inability to adjust character to time; Mr. Robinson, in taking Dagonet and Merlin from the story, leaves only one who succeeds in adjusting himself to the inevitable, and that one is Gawaine, who merely will

---tear one more leaf out of my book,
And let the next new page be its own story.

179. Ibid. 12
180. Ibid. 207.
181. Ibid. 207.
182. Ibid. 207.
183. Ibid. 169.
There is no doubt that Fate is the inevitable personality assumed by each individual. When Isolt, chiding Tristram for the regrets of his past blindness of himself, says to him,

    We cannot say what either of us had been
    Had we been something else. 184

she explains not only the reactions of herself and of Tristram in the circumstance of living, but also those of the gray-eyed Isolt of Brittany, and of Mark, who "must be always Mark." 185 Tristram, too, when he has found himself unable to save Isolt and himself from their destinies, knows fate of character to be stronger within him than he had recognized:

    I should have lost my nature not to take you
    Away from him - but now, having you here,
    I'm not so sure of nature as once I was. 186

There is nothing to do but wait for time - "time that is on our side." 187 One might as well "be wise enough not to ask more of life than to be life, and fate"; 188 to arm oneself with "blindness against fate is not to find peace," 189 as Tristram discovered in returning to the "friendliness, of old assured in Brittany." 190 When life has become "only a long waiting for an end of waiting," 191 "there is no more for them -

184. Ibid., 42.
185. Ibid., 184.
186. Ibid., 178.
187. Ibid., 56.
188. Ibid., 94.
189. Ibid., 99.
190. Ibid., 82.
191. Ibid., 125.
and this (death) is peace." 192

Robinison's three poems imply that a natural panacea is not to be found in institutions, for they, too, being the tools of change, are transitory:

The world will see itself in him, and then
The world will say its prayers and wash its face
And build for some new king a new foundation. 193

We have no faith in institutions

For we are not so common, I believe,
That we need kings and pits and flags and dragons
To make us know that we have let the world
Go by us. 194

A kingdom is a plaything to be given in jest to a court fool:

Your throne is empty and you may as well
Sit on it and be ruler of the world
From now till supper time. 195

In this conception, institutions being shadows and transitions, there is no very important place for the Round Table and for the kingship of Arthur.

The theme of Robinison's world philosophy - "The world is---a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks" - immediately suggests wherein his conception of Arthur differs from that of his predecessors. With the post-war lack of respect for kings has gone the old hero's reverence-inspiring personality as well as his leadership. Admiration for him is

192. Ibid, 198.
194. Ibid, 119.
195. Ibid, 141.
challenged. Where is the Arthur who demanded obedience and to secure it would go the length of cutting the noses from the fairest ladies of his court? Where is the man who, as a lad of fifteen, could with confidence invite his relatives to help him subdue a rebellious kingdom and who later dared ignore the mandates of Rome? Our historians, having discovered that in the past too much fiction was passed for truth, proceeded to "debunk" the past; history of the last decade, parent of the "new biography", has been a story not of strength but of weakness. That Robinson's Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram are typically modern in this respect is obvious, for, although there is nothing to show what Arthur accomplished through strength, there is much bungling to attribute to his weakness. In a society in which men do what they do badly, there is, logically, no place for a heroic character - for a hero is one who finds the right blocks with which to spell God.

In one way, Arthur is adequate. His ideals are exemplary; but his moral ambition is so lofty that his practice cannot reach his theory. There is nobility in his trust of Lancelot, but it is a trust which Lancelot himself knows to be unjust, as it expects too much of human nature.

196. Layaman's Brut, p. 210
197. Geoffrey of Monmouth, p. 57.
198. Ibid., 173.
199. I.e. Rupert Hughes, biography of Washington.
I went away from him with a sore heart;  
For in my heart I knew that I should fail  
My King, who trusted me too far beyond  
The mortal outpost of experience. 200

Again, Arthur's sentence of Guenevere is admirable in that it allows no corruption through personal interests; on the other hand, the twentieth century American has no respect for blind obedience to social law designed to control criminals. One can only wonder at a man who sits idly by, senseless with agony, while the flames glow about his wife bound to the stake. Malory showed the same scene, but Malory was dealing with a medieval Arthur, which explains the custom of burning unfaithful queens; Robinson's Arthur is a man busied, not with stag hunts and blood-thirsty vengeance upon enemies, but with introspective psychology. According to Robinson,

The man is living but the King is dead. 201

And uppermost in our minds is the fact that Arthur

---he being Arthur and a king

Has made a more pernicious mess than one. 202

Change has made him, like his Round Table

----where was drawn

The circle of a world, a thing of wreck
And yesterday - a furniture forgotten. 203

The last word in dearthurizing Arthur comes with Lancelot's taking the liberty to "pity" him, 204 a degradation he never experienced in his medieval roles. His kingdom dragged out its

200. Lancelot, p. 376.  
201. Merlin, p. 29.  
203. Lancelot, p. 401.  
204. Ibid, 402.
weary length only because his best friend for pity could not end it. Arthur is duped not only by Guenevere but also by his own stupidity. Believing himself to be kingly he made a kingdom, but he finds that his place is under, not on, the throne, and thus he is indeed a dupe. If he were not one, he could not be in Mr. Robinson's story, for all the characters are puppets at the command of Fate.

Guenevere's attitude toward the king is a strange anachronism. By some ironic twist of criticism Guenevere has got all the sympathy prompted by public interest in unhappy marriage. Unlike Hovey's maid who accepted marriage for what it was worth, taking it as another incident in life, she was "sold" to a king as a king's daughter. A sixth century princess would not have questioned the procedure, and a twentieth century lady would have conducted herself with more composure than did the beautiful queen who tried to keep the love of a restless Lancelot. As a British king, Arthur was as much the victim of custom as was Guenevere.

However, Guenevere is otherwise consistent with the character of one who lives each day as it comes and then suddenly finds that "all hours have an end"; although she lives a double life with the grace and skill of one who makes of it an art, she yet becomes "fatigued a little with her reasoning."205.

205. Ibid, 377.
She is the intuitive woman. Her wilful deception of her lord is not a new conception, for in original popular tradition her name was hopelessly associated with Modred, there being a time, it is said, when prayers for her soul were denied. A charming creation of good and bad, she has the distinction of being the first truly human woman in English literature. Her place at court was won not because she had moral depth but because she was Eve's daughter and Guenevere, because she had a "precious blue-veined cream-white soul." Treadorous as she was to Arthur, Malory, in his book designed to teach morals, praised her constancy in love and often had knights show their respect by sending conquered enemies to her to meet whatever fortune she disposed. Malory's Guenevere, secure in her own position of queen and woman of incomparable beauty, need have no fear of rivals. Her whole-hearted generosity to other women is noticeable. That human understanding was to be expected was intuitively felt by Isolt of Ireland, who having no one to share her secret, sent a message to Camelot's queen: "There be within the land but four lovers, that is Sir Launcelot du Lake and queen Guenevere, and Sir Tristram de Liones and queen Isoud." The Guenevere of Chretien de Troyes is sure

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206. Rhys, John, Studies In the Arthurian Legend, Oxford, 1891, Ch. III.
207. Lancelot, p. 414.
208. Morte Darthur, Bk. 18, Ch. 25.
209. Ibid, Bk. 8, Ch. 31.
enough of her own beauty to concede Enid the place of most charming maiden in the world. In Robinson's Lancelot, Guenevere may take "beauty's perilous privilege." She shows her old interest in having the central part in the affairs of her acquaintances in sending her boat to convey Isolt to Joyous Gard. It is because her dominance had been so taken for granted that the hour for Change found her unprepared, for the ground on which she stood did not belong to the queen of Camelot, but to Fate.

Naturally, Robinson's conception would show less deviation from previous treatment in delineation of women characters than in men, for his is an active world of change, and the four women of the poems are passive in their reactions to world influence. The tragedy of these four is that, in the words of the poet, they love "too much": the black and red Vivien who closed the gate between them so quietly "that Merlin could have heard no sound of it"; Isolt of the White Hands, whose gray eyes held "more care than happiness"; the other Isolt, whose face was the "color of love"; Guenevere, whose hands, Lancelot noticed when he left her for the last time, were "so pale and empty, and so

211. Lancelot, p. 419.
212. Ibid, 441.
214. Tristram, p. 104.
who was "less queen than woman for the nonce." The Mother in the convent had evidently seen many Gueneveres:

"We who love God alone, my child, are safest." Even Guenevere, that "envy of all women," must finally admit:

I see it now as always women must
Who cannot hold what holds them anymore.

The *Lancelot* shows as definitely as one could wish that Robinson's characters live in a man's world. A modern critic comments that *Lancelot* is "no pastoral swain in armor, but a man of experience and responsibility; who gives himself up to love with his whole soul in the season of love, and knows that a moment comes when love must break its own coils and let the soul free for further self-realization." This criticism expresses exactly the difference between the old and a new conception, for in no other treatment has *Lancelot* placed love as secondary; a survey of his origin will show how widely Robinson has strayed from the general conception of the character. He was not a member of the original Arthurian knighthood, nor even a figure of the legends and chronicles critics now believing him to be a creation of Walter Map, the

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217. Ibid., 370.
218. Ibid., 447.
219. Ibid., 383.
220. Ibid., 379.
romanticist whose influence is felt in Chretien de Troyes, Malory, and Tennyson.\textsuperscript{222} Appearing mysteriously as Guenevere's lover in a love story inferior to that of Tristram and Isolt, upon which it may have been modeled,\textsuperscript{223} he has always been a lover first of all. Malory gave him misleading importance as a knight and Tennyson has helped the world to remember him as the first knight, magically tutored and protected by the Lady of the Lake.\textsuperscript{224} Thus, not being a folk hero, he has less personality than Tristram or Gawaine, who were not cut out by a patented pattern from a piece of new material. Since our picture of him is that of the model example of the court lover, he is strikingly different as man of the world who finds that his emotional attachment will prohibit his making a success of his career. Gone, in spirit, is the Lancelot who would openly snatch Guenevere from the flames when the State was against him, who would nobly appear in tournament to prove by his might that she was faithful to Arthur.\textsuperscript{225} The Vision is his choice, and later, when the gold and white queen has become a black and white nun, he is reminded that his choice has been made, and that the Vision is all that he has.

\textsuperscript{222} Gurteen, The Arthurian Epic, p. 211.
\textsuperscript{223} Maynadier, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{224} The Story of Lancelot's life found in The Idylls of the King follows Map. See Gurteen, p. 211 ff.
\textsuperscript{225} Lancelot's combat with Meliagrance is a good example of this.
The story significance of the other great lover of the world, Sir Tristram differs from Lancelot's in that Tristram, choosing to remain constant to love, finds destruction in his inability to meet Change. He was as bound by Fate as Hamlet was.

"You are a king, Tristram, for you are one of the time-sifted few that leave the world. When they are gone, not the same place it was. Mark what you leave." 226

Although the character Tristram has its origin in early Welsh Arthurian tradition, 227 it is not until the romancers had dealt with the subject imaginatively that the story of Tristram and Isolt familiar to present day readers was developed. 228 But although romance did for these lovers what it did for Lancelot and Guenevere, there is no fundamental suggestion of the artificial l'amour courtois created for courtiers - the story of Tristram and Isolt forms the "first really great story of passionate romantic love in modern literature." 229 Fate and the indomitable force of character being substituted for the "love potion," Robinson's story of Tristram is essentially that of Malory, except that the old romancer, as in the case of Lancelot, emphasized the hero's knightly prowess, whereas the Tristram's intense grieving at the departure of Isolt is strongly suggestive of the conduct of Middle Age

226. Tristram, p. 83.
227. See Rhys, p. 37 ff.
229. Ibid, 103.
In both authors he is the hunter, the musician, the lover of women, the conqueror of men; and our American poet, like many of his predecessors, had no reason for playing upon his treachery and prevarication.

There is an exquisite and delicate witchery in Robinson's verse which some of the metaphysical poets like Coleridge and Shelley achieved by magic and supernatural fantasy, and with the best possible tool in Merlin, Robinson could have followed in their footsteps; but his magic—subtle and sensuous—results from a poetry of word and thought, and Merlin is left a man with an only claim to wisdom in being a developed human mind. He explains his own situation very well when he says of himself:

My ways are not the ways of other men:
My memories go forward.231

Merlin's power came with his ability, through knowledge of human nature, to analyse character and follow its fate to the inevitable. Even the seer and Vivien, like the other characters, are "less than Fate," and for this reason they cannot be masters of their world.

Had Robinson done nothing but create his Gawaine, modern Round Table enthusiasts could well pardon any anachronisms of interpretation. In this character, manly, facile, human, he has made excellent use of his peculiar ability to make

231. Merlin, p. 113.
imaginative characters live in flesh and blood. To make Gawaine the outstanding knight of the cycle, it was not necessary to name a poem for him—his personality colors the background of the three poems, making him a more consistent and more spectacular figure than either Merlin, Lancelot, or Tristram. Gawaine it was who held the world in his fingers, and Gawaine it was who tightened his fingers and crushed Camelot. This interpretation was as true for the twelfth century chronicler as for the twentieth century poet; like fate, or time, or human nature, Gawaine has determined the fortunes of the Table Round.

With no other character has time played more havoc than with Gawaine, who is perhaps, the most widely known of all the Arthurian heroes. It is curious that the first mention of Gawaine is a recording of the discovery of his tomb in the province of Ros in Wales, where he had reigned over Gallaway, that the obscurity of his tradition may have a basis in pseudo-history. Comparatively, the problem could be simply solved if he were, as is probable, the center of a cycle tradition in which Arthur may have originated as legend, but modern scholarship, on the basis of his other-world associations and the identification with the sun, will

232. *Jones*, p. 2
not ignore mythological influences. That his feats were the nucleus of the Arthurian exploits there can be but little doubt, it being known even that it was Gawaine, not Arthur, who first wore Excalibur. In fact, "There can be no doubt that Gawaine is the most famous of all the knights grouped around Arthur in pre-romantic tradition." In this role, he was the model of chivalrous courtesy until the time of Malory, his degradation, beginning perhaps in the Chastel Merveilleus of the Chretien de Troyes romance in which his knightly deliverance of maidens won him the title "maidens' knight", at last making of him a fickle lover and fickle soldier in The Idylls of the King. Even this misunderstanding in character, however, never succeeded in making him traitorous.

There is no deterioration for Gawaine at the pen of Geoffrey of Monmouth, who, rather surprisingly, gave but little artificial ornament to the character. His significance in the history may be summed up in the announcements of his birth, his education in Rome as a lad of twelve, his soldierly distinction in the Roman war, and his death in his uncle's war with Modred. There is a glimpse of the Gawaine known

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234. Loomis, Bks. II and III.
235. See Americanus, "Gawain".
237. See Encyclopaedia Britannica, 14th Edition, "Gawaine".
238. Geoffrey of Monmouth, 163.
239. Ibid., 165.
240. Ibid., 194.
241. Ibid., 197.
to moderns in the young knight encouraged to start a battle with Lucius in Arthur's absence242 and in his ability to do that very thing. But aside from this brief flash of personality his character may be said to have developed, in the chronicles, with Wace, who had no fear of seasoning history with romance. To Geoffrey's account Wace added that Gawaine "as yet was a damoeseau, young and debonair"243—and what more accurate or charming description of that immortal knight could ever be given? Furthermore, he was a "courteous champion, circumspect in word and deed, having no pride nor blemish in him. He did more than his beast, and gave more largely than he promised."244 With others, "that very frank and gentle knight"245 was bidden to Arthur's bridal feast, where he cast his vote in favor of peace, having discovered that "Merry tales, and songs, and ladies' love are delectable to youth"246 and that "by reason of the bright eyes and the worship of his friend, the bachelor becomes knight and learns chivalry."247 Being "a good clerk, meetly schooled,"248 he was sent by Arthur to Lucius, on which embassy he became "hot with anger"249 and where he displayed, for the first time on record,

243. Wace, p. 53.
244. Ibid, 57.
245. Ibid, 64.
246. Ibid, 73.
247. Ibid, 73.
248. Ibid, 87.
249. Ibid, 89.
his famous ironic courtesy. When he at last, "whose praise
was so often in the mouths of men,"\(^{250}\) was slain, Arthur
made over him marvellous sorrow. In Layamon's Brut, Arthur
addresses Gawaine as "dearest of men"\(^{251}\) to him, and throughout
the chronicle are accounts which leave no doubt as to his
courtesy and prowess, Layamon showing a partiality in describ­
ing his as "the keen."\(^{252}\) There is reason for this favoritism,
for Gawaine definitely states before the assembly that he will
desert Modred, his brother, in support of King Arthur.\(^{253}\)

Gawaine's facile disposition was taken for granted by the
various characters in the Robinson poems; no one took him
seriously. He in turn accepted his privileges without question;
not many upon seeing Lancelot in the King's garden would dare
to have "coughed and followed him."\(^{254}\) With no criticism on
either side, he can easily make love to Isolt and Isolt can as
easily answer him:

\[\text{Your words, and even with edges a bit worn.} \]
\[\text{By this time, will do service for years yet.}^{255}\]

The knowledge of his lightness was common property:

\[\text{You will be hanged some day} \]
\[\text{For saying things and I shall not be there} \]
\[\text{To save you, saying how little you meant by them.}^{256}\]

Irresponsible as he was known to be, there were times when he

\(^{250}\) Ibid, 106.
\(^{251}\) Layamon, p. 221
\(^{252}\) Ibid, 243.
\(^{253}\) Ibid, 260.
\(^{254}\) Lancelot, p. 365.
\(^{255}\) Tristram, p. 104.
\(^{256}\) Ibid, 105.
could inspire his companions with fear or discomfort; although he gave Guenevere the courtesy due a queen and matched her careful repartee with knightly grace, she feared him, and Lancelot was annoyed in finding Gawaine's hand so indifferent. Any of the passages in which Gawaine and Lancelot move together is of much comparative interest, the difference between them being that Lancelot had a philosophy which he could not live and Gawaine lived philosophically without a philosophy:

> Sometimes a random shaft of his will hit
> Nearer the mark than one a wise man aims
> With infinite address and reservation.257

Gawaine is preeminently a paradoxical figure—-he knows he is different, and in that knowledge he has lived up to the part so well that he himself forgets his rightful nature.

> And I'm to live as long as I'm to wonder
> What might have been, had I not been - myself.258

In the face of the world he tore the leaf and let "the next new page be its own story," and yet when the end came to Camelot, he could honestly take the blame:

> My God, if only I had said - said something.259

For his lightness was not selfish; his moral indifference was designed to be of benefit to others:

257. Lancelot, p. 374.
258. Ibid, 388.
259. Ibid, 389.
I said you would be coming back at once,  
And while I said it I heard pens in heaven.  
Scratching a doubtful evidence against me.  

And there was something besides lightness even in his jesting:  
The touch of Gawaine's lips on her cold fingers  
Kindly and light.  

His life ends fittingly with his talking in comradeship to  
the man whom he had forced to wound him mortally.  

Meanwhile, I liked this world; and what was on  
The Lord's mind when He made it is no matter.  

Robinson ignored Tennyson and Malory and gave us the  
gay "falcon of May" in the original.  

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260. Tristram, p. 111  
262. Lancelot, p. 433.
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