

## A Summary of Research

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The text of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*<sup>1</sup> (henceforth *AMA*) is now available in several adequate editions. D. S. Brewer and A. E. B. Owen have published a facsimile edition of the Thornton manuscript together with a useful analysis of its characteristic features.<sup>2</sup>

In 1865 G. G. Perry edited the text for the Early English Text Society, as did Edmund Brock in 1871, both under the number O.S.8.<sup>3</sup> In 1900 Mary M. Banks supervised a new edition of the poem, which Erik Björkman used in 1915 in his edition of the *AMA* in the series *Alt- und Mittelenglische Texte*.<sup>4</sup>

Björkman's edition was regarded as the standard text of the poem for many decades. It contains, however, hundreds of unnecessary emendations, most of which are based on the work of the Bonn School of Metrics (e.g. Trautmann and Mennicken). Thus Björkman's edition was already out of date at the time of its appearance.

The discovery of the Winchester MS. of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (1934) made a new edition of the *AMA* imperative.<sup>5</sup> It was promised by O'Loughlin in 1935.<sup>6</sup> In 1959 the prospective editor announced that the new edition was 'nearly ready'.<sup>7</sup> In the meantime several other editors have stolen the march on him. John Finlayson edited an abridged study edition in 1967 (*York Medieval Texts*).<sup>8</sup> In 1972 this was followed by S. D. Spanghel's edition, an as yet unpublished dissertation for the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>9</sup> In 1974 Larry D. Benson presented a simplified version 'for readers who have had little or no training in Middle English'.<sup>10</sup> The best edition of the *AMA*—in spite of its shortcomings—is Valerie Krishna's, which appeared in 1976; it contains an extensive introduction, a complete glossary, and a separate commentary which has taken the entire spectrum of research into account.

In a surprising consensus of opinion, nearly all critics agree that the *AMA* is one of the most significant works of the Alliterative Revival, or even, possibly, of Middle English literature. Helaine Newstead has called the poem 'one of the most powerful and original treatments of the Arthurian tradition'.<sup>11</sup> John Gardner once termed it 'a major poetic achievement',<sup>12</sup> and John Stevens, 'one of the best poems of the Alliterative Movement'.<sup>13</sup> The pathos, humour and realism of the *AMA* have been stressed by both the histories of literature and encyclopedias.<sup>14</sup>

The connection of the *AMA* with the *Brut* tradition was seen by the first scholars who dealt with the poem.<sup>15</sup> In regard to further sources beyond this tradition, a major contribution was made by Branscheid.<sup>16</sup> Matthews hypothesised a fourteenth-century French source, and traced the influence of certain Alexander-romances.<sup>17</sup> Finlayson suggested the connection of the poem to *Sir Firumbras*, *Destruction of Troy*, and further works, as for instance *Vows of the Heron*.<sup>18</sup> The relationship to the French chansons de geste has been mentioned a number of times.<sup>19</sup> It would seem that determination of the genre of the *AMA* depends on the sources postulated for the poem.<sup>20</sup>

More recent critics dispense with attempts to assign the poem to a certain genre. Instead, they note differences in form and content from other literary traditions of England and, more often, of the Continent. W. R. J. Barron identifies realistic elements, but also a certain degree of national consciousness which he sees as typical of the Alliterative Revival (including Layamon's *Brut*). He regards the dynastic theme centred on the figure of Arthur as the basis of the poem.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas the epic-heroic character of the *AMA* was emphasised by the older generation of critics, it is now, in concordance with Matthews, considered a medieval tragedy of fortune.<sup>22</sup> And yet even today there is still disagreement as to the message of the poem. Particularly controversial is the question of whether the poet describes the rise of a morally blameless Arthur during the first part of the poem, or whether he presents the king as corrupt and evil from the very beginning.<sup>23</sup>

In this respect, critical opinions contradict each other to such an extent that one has the feeling the critics are not even speaking of the same work. Roger Sherman Loomis, for instance, denies that the poet attributed any guilt to King Arthur.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Helaine Newstead refutes the idea of retribution, and sees the poem as an affirmation of Arthur's greatness.<sup>25</sup> Matthews, on the other hand, claims that Arthur was sinful from the start.<sup>26</sup> Most critics, however, take the middle road. D. S. Brewer speaks of the upward and downward movement of Fortune's wheel, thus taking the traditional concept of tragedy as his point of departure.<sup>27</sup> A similar position is voiced by Finlayson in several major contributions to the study of the poem.<sup>28</sup>

Even a cursory glance at critical evaluations of the *AMA* makes it clear that essential problems have not yet been solved. Thus there has been no close analysis of the dream of the Dragon and Bear, although it contains significant clues to the intention of the poet.<sup>29</sup> The dream of Fortune, however, has often been treated, usually in connection with the problem of genre.<sup>30</sup> The topos of the Nine Worthies, its derivation, and function has also been the subject of extensive treatment. H. Schroeder's major work on the topos, however, has been completely overlooked by Anglo-Saxon critics, although it must be regarded as the standard work on the subject; similarly, other important

research articles written in German have been ignored.<sup>31</sup>

Closely connected with the problem of how Arthur is to be judged, is the role his knights play in the poem. To some extent they have been seen as contrasting figures and foils for the King. This is particularly true of Gawain. Opinions on his character are no less contradictory than those on King Arthur.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand he is seen as an embodiment of the entire gamut of courtly virtues, and on the other, as a projection of Arthur's ambition.<sup>33</sup> Mordred presents a unique problem. O'Loughlin is convinced that Arthur's fall in the *AMA* 'is brought about by the Aristotelian *hamartia* of his begetting Mordred',<sup>34</sup> while Charles Regan finds no sign in the poem that the traitor is Arthur's son, 'not as much as a hint from either the poet or a character'.<sup>35</sup> Naturally these positions are mutually exclusive, but the text itself contains sufficient evidence for the solution of the problem.

A number of questions have hardly been treated by the critics, or remain to be dealt with adequately. There is, for example, the poet's unique brand of humour,<sup>36</sup> his tendency towards irony and parody, and above all his subtle use of indirect connotation and innuendo, which ultimately contribute to indirect characterisation of the figures. Some authors recognise ambiguities in the *AMA*,<sup>37</sup> and deduce that the poet has an ironic, or at least ambivalent attitude towards Arthur and his world.<sup>38</sup> Bernie speaks of 'unresolved ambiguity in the poet's attitude towards Arthur'.<sup>39</sup> Other critics focus on the degeneration of the protagonist from the majestic champion of Christianity to a brutal conqueror.<sup>40</sup>

The formulaic character of the *AMA* was recognised and dealt with very early, particularly in connection with the Huchown question. On the basis of language, metre and verse formation, several critics attempted to prove that the same poet had written several alliterative works, including the *AMA*.<sup>41</sup> A refutation of the theory is no longer necessary. For quite a number of years it has been clear that nearly all so-called 'parallels' were 'accidents of convention in the alliterative type'.<sup>42</sup>

The conclusions drawn by the same school on the basis of metre were equally tenuous. Trautmann and Mennicken claimed that the alliterative long-line of the *AMA* was to be read with seven stresses, and that emendation was needed wherever a line did not comply with this requirement.<sup>43</sup> Mennicken sometimes resorted to desperate measures to achieve his goal, as for instance by sounding the end -e, even before a following vowel,<sup>44</sup> which is contradictory to the historical evidence as shown by Luick.<sup>45</sup> J. L. N. O'Loughlin has pointed out that irregularities in metre and alliteration follow a certain pattern, and that the stress and rhythm of the poem were not half as rigid as had been claimed.<sup>46</sup> In the meantime a new approach has been taken to the problem of metrics in the poem. Duggan and Vaughan have argued that runs

of alliteration indicate four-line strophic structure.<sup>47</sup>

What has given rise to difficulty is the fact that the metric criteria drawn from Old English cannot be applied without alteration to the contingencies of Middle English because of the greater flexibility of long-line in the latter.

With the application of the so-called 'oral formulaic theory' to Old and Middle English, the phenomenon of repetition in medieval poetry was seen in a new light. It soon became apparent that there was more to the formula than a mere syntactical pattern or 'mould', and that meaning and function had to be taken into consideration as well. Finlayson and those after him thus rightly objected to Waldron's formalistic approach;<sup>48</sup> but Lawrence later defended its usefulness when applied in conjunction with the usual techniques of oral formulaic analysis.<sup>49</sup> Although there have been some attempts to formulate consistent and adequate definitions of the oral formulaic elements as used in Middle English,<sup>50</sup> these have generally been disregarded by critics dealing with the *AMA*. The lack of progress in this direction has led to recent negative statements, such as Tonsfeldt's contention that verbal style and formulaism in the *AMA* are far less interesting than the narrative formulaic elements it contains,<sup>51</sup> or that of Turville-Petre, whose recent book on the Alliterative Revival states polemically: 'Fourteenth-century alliterative poetry cannot . . . be described as formulaic in any meaningful sense . . .'.<sup>52</sup>

Many scholars writing before Turville-Petre have chosen to describe verbal repetition in Middle English alliterative poetry in terms of word collocation,<sup>53</sup> but few except Finlayson have seen a connection between this phenomenon and the oral formulaic theory of Parry and Lord. Only Finlayson and Turville-Petre have dealt with collocations of more than two words or those extending beyond two lines in length. Most who have dealt with the *AMA* have noted areas where formulas and verbal repetition are heavily concentrated in contrast to the rest of the poem,<sup>54</sup> and a connection between these and the so-called 'runs' of alliteration on the same letters has been noted, although no causal relationship was postulated.<sup>55</sup>

Most scholars agree that the *AMA* and many other Middle English poems were meant to be recited, and thus made use of and were influenced by the style and conventions of oral popular poetry, even though they were composed in writing.<sup>56</sup> Thus some inconsistencies in the *AMA*, such as the fact that Lucius apparently dies twice, have been attributed to the process of oral composition.<sup>57</sup>

More controversial than the question of oral or written composition in Middle English is that of the metrical function of the formula. Much early research on formulaism in the *AMA* made a distinction between formulas of the first half-line, and those of the second.<sup>58</sup> One recent definition of the Middle English formula requires, among other things,

that it be repeated 'in similar contexts and in the same metrical position'.<sup>59</sup> This is, however, true neither of Old English poetry nor of Middle English. Many formulas do occur in both half-lines and in various contexts. In addition, there is no economy in the older sense of that word<sup>60</sup> (namely that a given idea was always expressed in the same way), although one recent author has claimed the contrary.<sup>61</sup>

A major step in formulaic research was the recognition that the interpretative value of formulaism rested in the function and meaning of formulas and formulaic elements in the context of the whole. Here, too lay the answer to the question of poetic creativity and originality within the framework of stereotyped convention. Parallel to a shift of interest to such matters in Old English research, a call was issued for more attention to the meaning and function of formulaic expressions as a key to our understanding of the text and of the work of the poet. Examples from the *AMA* made it evident that a hierarchy of values could be observed: semantic meaning might be sacrificed to fulfil metric contingencies (alliteration), while metric correctness, in turn, might be sacrificed in order to retain the habitual wording of the formula.<sup>62</sup>

Other studies of individual formulas and their significance followed, emphasising the originality and individual achievement of the poet to a greater degree than earlier critics, such as Finlayson.<sup>63</sup> Laila Gross analysed the use of the word 'riot' in formulas and elsewhere, postulating that formulaic occurrences of the word would exhibit little or no change of meaning.<sup>64</sup> The individual and creative use of formulas placed in an alien context was pointed out by Turville-Petre, who noted that the two-word collocation 'king' and 'crown' generally used for Arthur is significantly applied to Gawain at the end of the poem.<sup>65</sup> A similar phenomenon has been mentioned by Grenier, namely the reversal of a stock motif, 'exultation over a fallen foe'. Both Frederick and Mordred lament the death of Gawain rather than, as usual, taunting the fallen foe.<sup>66</sup>

Little work has been done on formulaic themes in the poem. Finlayson concentrated on battle and knighthood in his 1963 article, and his work has been extended by Tonsfeldt.<sup>67</sup> Johnson has attempted to prove the occurrence of an Old English 'theme' called 'The-Hero-on-the-Beach' in the *AMA*.<sup>68</sup> In short, it is evident that work on the creative use of formulaic style in the *AMA* has only begun.

The date of composition of the *AMA* has been a matter of controversy since its first publication. The manuscript can be dated at about 1440, since the name of the compiler, Robert Thornton, and his biographical details have come down to us.<sup>69</sup> The date of the text is more difficult to determine; critics have had to turn to intrinsic indications in the poem itself.

The first historical interpretation of the *AMA* was offered by G. Neilson in his book on *Huchown of the Awle Ryale*.<sup>70</sup> Neilson made

Huchown the author of nearly all extant Middle English alliterative verse, a supposition which proved much more tenuous than his very interesting study of historical parallels, which even today has to be given careful consideration. According to Neilson, the battle of Sessoyne is Crécy, the Sea Battle is Winchelsea, Mordred is Mortimer, and the Viscount of Rome is the Milanese Visconti.<sup>71</sup> This would place the date of the text at about 1365. Inman pointed out that allusions to Edward III's reign do not necessarily mean that the poem originated during Edward's lifetime.<sup>72</sup>

The first attempt to use the description of costume as a criterion for dating was by H. Eagleson.<sup>73</sup> In the long sleeves (*lappes*) of Lady Fortune, he saw a parallel to feminine dress of Edward III's period. J. L. N. O'Loughlin noted a resemblance to a description in *Wynnere and Wastoure* ('slabbande sleues sleght to þe grounde', 411), and therefore concluded that the *AMA* must have originated shortly after that poem, which was written in the winter of 1352–53.<sup>74</sup> The doubtfulness of this kind of argument became apparent when E. Schröder tried to demonstrate that *Wynnere and Wastoure* was dependent on the *AMA*, thus arguing for an even earlier date of the latter.<sup>75</sup>

The element of the pilgrimage to Rome was brought into the discussion by G. B. Parks.<sup>76</sup> He takes the view that the author of the *AMA* himself made a pilgrimage to Rome, probably in the Holy Year of 1350. His arguments are based on the author's intimate knowledge of details of the route to Rome. A further criterion for the dating of the poem was seen in the vows the Arthurian knights made on the *vernacle*, an emblem of the veil of Veronica, which was worn by pilgrims to Rome in the fourteenth century.<sup>77</sup> Other critics commented on the connection between historical conditions and the realistic description of battle in the poem. The first to point out the uncourtly character of King Arthur and his knights was Dorothy Everett in 1955; her seminal article initiated a new line of thought in regard to the poem.<sup>78</sup>

In his book on the *Tragedy of Arthur* (1960), William Matthews argues for a date 'soon after 1375 . . . when the ordinary Englishman was weary of the tragic futility of his rulers' imperial conquests'.<sup>79</sup> Larry Benson accepts Matthews' view that the poem truly portrays the fourteenth-century attitude towards warfare. At the same time, however, he warns against drawing a concrete parallel between the treason of Guinevere and Mordred and that of Isabella and Mortimer. Benson also remains unconvinced that the poet drew 'a portrait of Arthur in the likeness of Edward III'.<sup>80</sup>

Another critic who followed in the footsteps of G. Neilson in looking for historical parallels was Roger Sherman Loomis, who recognised in the *AMA* the spirit of the fifties.<sup>81</sup> In his opinion, the poem is a panegyric on Edward III's exploits on the Continent. Later, even Benson, following Dorothy Everett's lead, came to recognise historical parallels

which made the *AMA* a poem of its own place and period.<sup>82</sup> Thus, for example, he perceived in Arthur's grim humour a parallel to the character of the Black Prince. Finlayson, on the other hand, remained sceptical towards historical parallels. The description of Fortune's *lappes* is in his opinion too vague to suggest a particular date. He would deny nearly all of Neilson's parallels, with the one exception of the Battle of Winchelsea. Although he admits that the poem reflects the reign of Edward III in a general way, he rejects the idea of a *roman à clef*.<sup>83</sup>

In his modern English translation John Gardner takes up Neilson's and Matthews' historical parallels, although he himself is not convinced that the poetic power of the poem lies 'chiefly in what may have been its immediate political purpose'.<sup>84</sup> Gardner emphasises 'that the reader who enters into the situation behind the poem will appreciate more than the reader who does not'.<sup>85</sup> A lop-sided view of the historical parallels was presented by G. Keiser, who dismisses the entire palette of alleged topical allusions: 'The complete uncertainty about the authorship and the dating of the poem as well as the circumstances in which the poem was written would seem an unsurmountable problem for those who would find a pattern of "cryptic" allusions'.<sup>86</sup> A more balanced view of the problem is presented by J. Barnie in his book on *War in Medieval Society*. He sees the poem as far too subtle to be regarded as a mere catalogue of topical allusions and political parallels. Contrary to his own premises and promises, he only deals with the *AMA* in an appendix, thus indicating his doubts as to the historical source value of works of this kind.<sup>87</sup>

Investigation of the historical and political background of the poem will no doubt continue. Larry D. Benson's article of 1976 has focussed on the year 1400, in view of the fact that no detailed description of the travel route to Rome was available prior to 1402 from which the poet could have drawn the Italian place-names. Though he recognises Richard II in Mordred and Henry IV in Arthur, Benson, too, rejects the idea that the poem is a *roman à clef*.<sup>88</sup> J. Vale, as well, is convinced that contemporary conditions are reflected realistically in the *AMA*, and that 'it provides a remarkable insight into the attitudes and preoccupations of a diplomat and administrator in the second half of the reign of Edward III'.<sup>89</sup> According to this theory, the author of the *AMA* may have been a public servant at the court of King Edward III. Promising conclusions and affirmation of the necessity of taking the historical and political background into account may be expected from the forthcoming book by Beate Schmolke-Hasselmann entitled *Der arthurische Versroman von Chrestien bis Froissart*.<sup>90</sup>

Modern literary criticism now tends to take literary works of art, including the romances, far more seriously — not only as sources of historical facts, but also as comments on and even interpretations of the

course of contemporary events by those who were in a position to understand them. In this sense literature is a reflection of what people thought, feared and hoped. Works such as the *AMA* are even more outspoken in this respect than the chronicles, and the picture presented is more comprehensive. But it is subtly encoded in the form of literary devices and thus in need of interpretation by the literary critic. It is the aim of the authors of the following essays to contribute to this goal.