

Reality versus Romance
A Reassessment of the
Alliterative Morte Arthure

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I

The *AMA* has been classified by literary critics as a romance, an epic, and a *chanson de geste*, as well as a tragedy, an *exemplum* of the virtue of fortitude, and a *Fürstenspiegel*. There are sound arguments for each of these categories, and this alone is proof of the fact that it is impossible to ascribe the poem to a single literary genre. Like many other masterpieces of world literature, the *AMA* defies neat pigeon-holing. It was almost inevitable that a new, detailed study of the *AMA* and its relation to contemporary chronicles, history, and literature would lead to a reassessment of this many-faceted work of art.

A historian recently called the poem 'quite unique in fourteenth-century English romance'.¹ If it could at all be called a romance, it is one with a very peculiar twist to it. The *AMA* has outgrown its genre historically. While still clinging to its traditional framework, stock characters and themes, it has become its own opposite. This is particularly evident in the light of its contemporary near relation, the so-called stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, with its love story and pure romance character. When compared with works of this kind, the *AMA* can and should be called an anti-romance. This term, of course, is not meant to designate a new literary genre, an undertaking which would be more than difficult. Even the problem of defining romance, with its immense spectrum of applications, has never been satisfactorily solved.² Suffice it to say that 'romance' is generally regarded as 'a fictitious narrative . . . of which the scene and incidents are very remote from those of ordinary life.'³

In the case of the *AMA* the figures and events are taken from a literary tradition which was at the time and even is today connected with what could be called prototypical romance. But this is only a very thin veneer, a kind of historical drapery, which — for large portions of the poem — is insufficient to disguise the contemporaneity of the main characters and their actions. Since Neilson there has been general agreement that in the *AMA* familiar literary figures are used to represent contemporary rulers and the problems of the time; the degree and scope of this reciprocal relationship, however, have remained controversial.⁴

At the same time, familiar literary genres of romance are criticised or even satirised, having become nothing more than empty clichés, widely divorced from any historical or contemporary reality. The poet seems particularly interested in unmasking the trivialised and romanticised form of literary portrayal of war and heroism, by confronting it with the moral and physical results of real war. Thus the *AMA* is in two respects an anti-romance: it ushers in personalities and problems of contemporary life in the costume of distant centuries; but even more important, it destroys commonplaces of chivalry and knightly warfare through inversion, irony and black humour.

The figures and events are traditionally familiar but they have undergone a sea-change. Arthur is still the admired head of state, but is shown to be morally corrupted by his growing power. Lancelot is no longer the most prominent and best knight of the Round Table; instead he is placed on a par with Valyant, Ewayn and Loth, and there is no love intrigue with Guinevere. Gawain is the leading figure among the knights, but he is far from being a perfect model of knighthood. He is arrogant and frivolous, acts rashly and impetuously, usurps command and oversteps his power. His metaphors are hardly courteous, for he promises to subdue the enemy to a state of meekness likened to the 'bouxom' willingness of a bride in bed (2858).

In the *AMA*, the opening boudoir scene of the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* (Arthur and Guinevere lie in bed, chatting about bygone adventures) has been replaced by the battlefield. A tragic parting before the king leaves for war marks Arthur's relationship with his wife. Guinevere in her turn wickedly conspires with Mordred and even bears him two children although she is usually represented as barren. Mordred is no simple traitor. He regards himself as a rightful pretender to the crown; in the final battle he changes his arms accordingly and wears the three leopards of England.

In the *AMA* the reality of war in all its gruesomeness and the contemporaneity of the fourteenth century clash heavily with the world of romance. Nearly all the stereotype scenes of courtly literature are recognisable, but they are embedded in new contexts and ridiculed either by comic-ironic parody or by confrontation with the historical reality of the fourteenth century. Indeed the burden of topical allusion weighs so heavily that Arthur appears almost as a contemporary fourteenth century king.

Even those episodes which up to the present have been seen as pure romance, e.g. the Priamus episode (2501–2715), achieve, by virtue of the poet's subtle use of irony and inversion of traditional motifs, the very opposite effect. Romance is negated and even reduced to absurdity. Of overall importance is the poet's attitude towards war. Two souls dwell in his breast, for he is simultaneously a patriot and an opponent of war—at times holding positions that would nowadays be called

pacifist. This dichotomy is responsible for the ambivalence of the poem in matters Arthurian. The king is at one and the same time the greatest ruler that has ever lived on earth and yet a doomed soul.

II

The overall message of the poem can only be seen against the background of Arthurian tradition as a whole. From the very beginning the figure of King Arthur had strong political implications. This was already true of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, which saw King Arthur as an incarnation of the idea of the Empire.⁵ Most English kings after the conquest have regarded themselves as lawful heirs and successors of King Arthur. An entire series of kings had no objections against being styled as *Arturus redivivus*. Henry III led his troops under the Arthurian banner of the dragon.⁶ Edward I was an 'Arthurian enthusiast' and held jousts and tournaments which he called 'Table Rounds'.⁷ The same is true of Edward III, the founder of the Order of the Garter:

[he] toke pleasure to newe reedefy the Castell of Wyndsore, the whiche was begonne by kyng Arthure; and ther firste beganne the Table Rounde, wherby sprange the fame of so many noble knyghtes throughout all the worlde.⁸

John Lydgate called Henry V 'of knythode Lodesterre, . . . Able to stond among the worthy nyne', which recalls King Arthur as the most famous of the Worthies.⁹ Particularly the Tudor and Stuart kings were connected with King Arthur. Henry VII called his first-born son Arthur. In the seventeenth century the designation 'Arthurian' was practically synonymous with 'royalist'.¹⁰ Thus Arthurian literature always had a political cast, whatever the period. It follows that during the fourteenth century and after, the audience of the *AMA* would have expected topical allusions to the reigning English monarch.

Thus it also seems quite likely that Arthurian poets, and among them almost certainly the author of the *AMA*, used their work as a vehicle for political instruction, as a 'mirror for magistrates' or *Fürstenspiegel*. This should not tempt us to read the *AMA* as a *roman à clef*, or to draw a one-to-one relationship between specific historical personalities and major figures in the poem.

The poem is a literary work which illustrates parallels and analogies to historical persons and events by means of an imaginative story (parable). The events of the Hundred Years War obviously form the background of the poem, but fourteenth century disillusionment with royal war and its consequences has been transferred to a faraway and fictitious world usually having romantic associations, and therefore

well suited to make the miseries of the age stand out in relief.

Even as early as the beginning of the fourteenth century, chroniclers regarded the idea of a society based on chivalry as no more than a fiction. The ideals of the poets and the moralists became more and more remote from reality, and, conversely, the code of chivalry was increasingly reduced to a mere alibi — to a literary bauble and a social game. Thus in 1344 King Edward III vowed to found an Order of knights based on the code of honour of King Arthur and his Round Table, although, only two years earlier, French propaganda had accused him of raping the Countess of Salisbury in a most uncourteous fashion.¹¹

In various passages historical persons and events are reflected in a recognisable way. Thus the author mentions that Arthur holds a large council before his decision to wage war, just as English kings were accustomed to do. The response of Arthur's councillors in this matter is described in a way similar to political discussions in England preceding the Hundred Years War, where the idea of war was greeted enthusiastically.¹²

The mention of the Commons (274) is of particular note in this connection. Arthur refuses to recognise Lucius' demand for tribute because the alleged rights of this Roman Emperor cannot be based on treaties with English kings; on the contrary, they have been granted the Romans by the 'comons': They 'couerd it of comons, as cronicles telles.' (274) The word *comons*, in this context, refers to the representatives of the shires and the boroughs. Thus English parliamentary history is reflected here. During the fourteenth century the commons gained more and more power over king and nobles in the approval of tax levies — not, of course, without resistance on the part of the king.¹³ This is also evident in King Arthur's incriminating remark on the commons, which must be seen as a reflex of the tensions between the king and nobility on the one hand and the commons on the other.

Further details support the conclusion that the poet used concrete events of the fourteenth century to give the work a contemporary veneer. Thus he states that Arthur's ceremonial sword Clarent was kept in Wallingford Castle, a place which is not mentioned anywhere else in Arthurian literature. There may be no traditional connection of Arthur (or Guinevere) with Wallingford, but there certainly is one with the royal family, since it belonged to the Black Prince from 1337 onwards. Various ladies of the royal house were quartered in Wallingford Castle during the fourteenth century, as for instance Edward III's mother Isabella; the wife of the Black Prince, Joan of Kent; and Richard II's second wife, Isabella of France.¹⁴ It is therefore not surprising that Guinevere, King Arthur's wife, is connected with Wallingford in the poem. Arthur's wardrobe was located there, and it was in this castle that Guinevere took unlawful possession of Arthur's sword Clarent

and passed it to Mordred.

A similar connection to historical events can be seen in the cryptic formulation of the poet that the Duchess of Brittany who had been abducted by the giant of Mont St Michel is a relative of Arthur's wife ('thy wyfes cosyn', 864). Geoffrey and Wace refer to the giant's having ravished Helen, the niece of Arthur's kinsman, Howel. Layamon describes the abducted lady as the daughter of Howel, a nobleman of Brittany. It is highly probable that the poet of the *AMA* is alluding to the Duchess of Brittany and that the contemporary audience would have interpreted his words as an allusion. She is referred to as the king's 'wyfes cosyn' and the poet emphasises this relationship by the special tag, 'knowe it if þe lykez.' (864). Neilson tried to establish a relationship between Philippa of Hainault, Edward III's wife, and Jean de Montfort, one of the claimants to the Duchy of Brittany, but he had to admit that 'Pedigrees are troublesome things, and I do not profess them.'¹⁵ Neilson overlooked the fact that there were two claimants to the Duchy in the fourteenth century. The problem of succession in Brittany was a matter of bitter dispute which marked the beginning of the wars between France and England. In the eyes of the French, Jeanne de Penthièvre was the true Duchess of Brittany and she was actually related to Philippa by her marriage to Charles de Blois.¹⁶ Edward III supported Jean de Montfort, while Philip, king of France, went to the aid of Jeanne de Penthièvre. The poet's explicit reference to the Duchess of Brittany as a relative of Arthur's wife is probably an indication that he intended to allude to Edward III's involvement in Brittany.

The detailed description of warfare in the *AMA* is a significant feature with a close connection to the historical background of the period. Contemporary methods of waging war are recognisable in a great number of passages. Thus, for instance, Arthur's tactics in the battle of Sessayne have been viewed as parallels to the commands and the strategy of Edward III at the battle of Crécy, for instance the development of bowmen, which in the period was both revolutionary and decisive for the outcome of a battle. Some passages have given rise to speculation that Arthur had his knights dismount, as Edward had done at the battle of Crécy. Similarities have also been seen in the battle-array of Arthur's troops. The great sea battle at the end of the poem has been compared to the sea battle of Winchelsea, at which Edward conquered a Spanish fleet. The author of the *AMA* says quite unexpectedly that Spaniards ('Spanyolis', 3700) went overboard, when he should have spoken of the Danes who were Mordred's mariners (3610, 3694). These, in turn, have been associated with the Danish plunderers who ravaged the English coast during the Hundred Years War.¹⁷

The poet of the *AMA* gives evidence of his knowledge of the martial laws of his time. The conditions under which the Roman ambassadors

are guaranteed their safety and granted free passage are much the same as those given to historical embassies during the fourteenth century.¹⁸ When Arthur promises the Duchess of Lorraine a dowry for herself and her children from the revenues of the estates of her husband, who himself will have to remain a prisoner until the end of his life, he is implementing a common practice of the time (3088–9).¹⁹ This is very similar to the situation which arose after Edward III had given his daughter away in marriage to Enguerrand de Coucy in return for his promise of absolute loyalty. As a dowry the couple were given a number of estates in England. When Coucy went over to the French king in 1379, Isabella was given his English estates to provide for her and her children.²⁰

The personal names of the figures also remind the reader of historical personages. Among the companions of Gawain are men called Montagu ('Mownttagus', 3773). This family played a dominant rôle during the reigns of all three Edwards. William Montagu, second earl of Salisbury, fought at the battles of Crécy and Poitiers and was one of the original Knights of the Garter.²¹ In conclusion it can be said that there is a close relationship between historical persons and events and their reflection in the poem.

In addition to these direct allusions to figures and events, which were more or less undisguised and thus easily recognisable to a contemporary audience, there are indirect allusions and references which are communicated by means of irony and other literary devices, some of them very sophisticated and subtle. Since appreciation of such passages is only possible in the light of the historical background of the time, modern readers are no longer in a position to recognise the significance of all the veiled or ironic allusions made by the poet.

An obvious example of this kind of irony occurs when Arthur receives the senators from Rome and a banquet is prepared for them which Arthur claims is but 'feble' fare (226). From the exceedingly detailed description of the actual meal served, it is obvious that Arthur's understatement is intentional. The senator says that Arthur is the 'lordlyeste lede þat euer I one luyde' (138). Through the long list of dishes served at the feast the poet highlights Arthur's weakness for luxury and pomp, a fact of particular significance in the light of contemporary prohibitions. Edward III had passed a law limiting the number of courses with the object of reducing expenditure on rich food: 'no man, of what estate or condition soever he be, shall cause himself to be served in his house or elsewhere, at dinner, meal, or supper, or at any other time, with more than two courses, and each mess of two sorts of victuals at the utmost, be it of flesh or fish, with the common sorts of pottage, without sauce or other sort of victuals . . .'.²² In the light of this Statute, the king's banquet was highly immoderate and even illegal, an allusion which a contemporary audience would most certainly have understood. Almost

the same meal is put on the Waster's table in *Wynnere and Wastoure*, so that there can be little doubt that the king, be it Arthur or Edward, was considered a glutton and a waster *par excellence*.

The poet's descriptions of the king's rich dress are in all likelihood a form of covert irony intended to reveal his disapproval of the sumptuous fashions of the time. Although King Edward himself had passed one law in 1336 and a second one in 1363 relating to 'the outrageous and excessive apparel of divers people against their estate and degree to the great destruction and impoverishment of all the land', he failed to moderate his own dress.²³ The Monk of Malmesbury criticised this extravagant fashion in his *Chronicle*, denouncing it as more fit for women than men.²⁴

After Arthur's dream of the Wheel of Fortune, there is a detailed description of his marvellous clothes. The poet admires them only on a superficial level. After Arthur's fall from the Wheel, when he has been told to repent, they appear in a negative light in comparison with those of the pilgrim, Cradoke, who scathingly comments to Arthur, whom he does not recognise: whoever you think you are, for all your rich clothes and finery, you cannot stop me from going on my pilgrimage to Rome, despite the war that is going on (cf. 3492-6).

A strange comparison between war and pilgrimage runs in the form of an undercurrent through the whole work. At the beginning of the poem, Arthur's knights all swear by the vernicle, the kerchief of St Veronica, that they will wage war in Italy and kill Lucius. Obviously there is a connection between Italy and St Veronica's veil because it was displayed in St Peter's at Rome. At the same time the vernicle was the symbol of those who made the pilgrimage to Rome.²⁵ The overt irony of the vernicle motif lies in the fact that Arthur's knights all swear a sacred oath, as if they were going on a pilgrimage, but their true intent is slaughter.

In the light of Cradoke's later mention of a pilgrimage to Rome despite war, and in view of the irony of the sham-pilgrimage in the episode of Mont St Michel, topical allusions seem highly probable, e.g. to the exposition of Veronica's veil in 1350, or to the fact that King Edward III forbade his subjects to go to Rome for the Jubilee because of the war.²⁶

III

In spite of what has been said by Benson concerning the relationship of romance and reality in the fifteenth century, it is safe to say that the idea of warfare based on chivalric laws was recognised as outdated by the fourteenth century.²⁷ War had developed its own laws which were no longer compatible with the lofty sentiments of idealistic dreamer-poets.

The author of the *AMA* is certainly not one of them as becomes evident in his conscious departure from the traditional motifs, stylistic devices and stereotypes of classical and post-classical Arthurian romance, whenever these stand in the way of his intention to expose and even *explode* the myths of romance. He makes use of older literary traditions, e.g. the *chanson de geste*, in which he apparently sensed the presence of a kindred spirit.²⁸ An outward sign of this is his use of the alliterative long line, which differs from that found in other *Arthurian* works of the alliterative revival.

Even the criteria of language, e.g. vocabulary, metre, and stylistic devices, seem intended to convey a certain message. This is true even if the alliterative mode was not chosen to express resentment against the court of London and its French bias, as has been suggested. The alliterative long line is an unsuitable vehicle for the gentler tone of the typical romance. For the same reasons the author has abandoned the *aventure* structure which is an essential feature of other Arthurian prose and verse romances. Only two episodes of this kind remain, and they must be completely redefined, namely Arthur's battle with the Giant of Mont St Michel (840–1221) and the Priamus episode (2501–2715).

The battle of Arthur with the giant of Mont St Michel has been called a 'purely romantic element in the story'.²⁹ It is certainly the poet's major expansion of the episode as recounted by Geoffrey, Wace and Layamon and is an entertaining mock *aventure* which serves something of the purpose of the inversion or even parody of a knightly combat. There is the traditional setting, a *locus amoenus*, Arthur's arming, and the romance situation of a damsel in distress to be rescued. But neither the damsel, nor the giant are true to orthodox romance. The giant is a preposterously grotesque monster whose body is a weird conglomeration of parts drawn from twelve different animals, ranging from a boar to a badger. Obscenity was taboo in medieval courtly literature, yet the poet describes the giant's unshapely loins and does not omit the fact that he was not wearing breeches, reminding us of the devils in medieval mystery plays. In the fight Arthur severs this 'myx's' (cf. 989) genitals with his sword. After a rough-and-tumble wrestling match which is very far removed from chivalric battle, he eventually succeeds in subduing his opponent. Arthur does not even strike the final and fatal blow himself. Instead he asks Bedever to stab the giant to the heart.

The damsel is no less a personage than the Duchess of Brittany herself whom the giant abducted while she was out riding near Rennes (853). The duchess in the poem is not rescued in true Arthurian spirit, and the poet spares us no details when he explains that the giant 'slewe hir vnsleye and slitt hir to þe nauyll'. (979). The battle with the giant of Mont St Michel is certainly a very twisted 'romantic element in the story'. Arthur's humour and irony, the emphasis on bawdy and grotesqueness, all this turns the episode into a burlesque *aventure*.

As far as the Priamus episode is concerned, the poet has set it between two grim battles, and the result is what may be called 'structural irony.'³⁰ His purpose is obvious. He wants to highlight the frivolity and triviality of knightly combat in order to use it as a foil for the brutality of war. In the episode, even the wound that Gawain inflicts upon Priamus is highly fantastic and bears no comparison with those of the battlefield. Gawain splits the knight's shield in two and wounds him so seriously that his liver is exposed to the sunlight (2560–1). Gawain, on the other hand, has no drop of blood left in his veins (2697). When Gawain and Priamus clash swords, flames flash from their weapons and their helmets. Priamus' and Gawain's wounds are treated with the magic water of Paradise which Priamus carries with him in a golden phial and the knight is as fit as a fish ('fische-halle', 2709) after four hours.

By bringing romantic fiction into a strongly realistic context, the author is confronting the audience with the idea that chivalric jousting was nothing more than a ridiculous game. Finlayson seems to have had something similar in mind when he spoke of an implied 'detrimental judgement on this particular form of chivalric action.'³¹ By inserting this romantic *aventure*, the poet relativises the whole concept of romance, setting it in a world of reality. Romance as a literary genre is ironised by its use as a foil juxtaposed to hard facts.

But not only structural irony is instrumental in debunking the clichés of romance; the poet's descriptive mannerisms also serve purposes which differ greatly from those of the usual portrayal of knightly combat. The way which the poet chose to describe the actual fighting on the battlefield evokes disgust in the reader today. The hideous details have little to do with knightly *courtoisie*. War historians have pointed out that battle strategy had basically changed in the fourteenth century, and that chivalric single combat had been replaced by mass battle in which the old norms of conduct barely played a part. Revolting and disgusting injuries to the human body are described in detail. When Sir Floridas kills Feraunt's kinsman, a mixture of entrails and excrement falls at the horse's feet (2780–3). The liver and lungs of a foe remain on the lance when it is pulled out of his body (2168). The ground is red and slippery with the blood of the dead. The dying lie torn open, while others writhe in agony on their horses (2143–7).

It is notable that the author seems to have been mildly obsessed with wounds 'below the belt'. As has already been noted, Arthur enrages the Giant of Mont St Michel by slicing his genitals off. When he kills the Viscount of Valence, the place of injury is described by using the pubic region as a point of orientation, even though it seems superfluous to do so: The spear penetrates the short ribs one span above the genitals (2060–1). In view of this little idiosyncrasy of the poet's, mention of a knight named 'Ienitall' (2112) need not necessarily be regarded as a slip of the pen in want of emendation. Many editors have proposed

corrections, and Krishna changes 'Ienitall' to 'Ionathal'. Most likely 'Ienitall' was a highly telling name, or a Freudian slip on the part of either the author, or the scribe.

The terrible descriptions of death are not to be found in the sources or forerunners of the *AMA*, although Old Norse Tales, French *chansons de geste* and English chronicles (e.g. Layamon's *Brut*) are not exactly squeamish when describing combat and bloodshed. The purpose of such descriptions in the *AMA* seems evident. Obviously they enhance the heroism of Arthur's men. The greater the opponent, the worse a death he deserves. Revenge mobilises the knights' last atom of strength. In literature as on the battlefield, the death of a foe was a source of pleasure for a fourteenth-century knight. In his *Chronicle*, Geoffrey le Baker of Swinbroke describes how the Black Prince, then a sixteen-year old boy, won his first honours at Crécy, serving as an example of chivalry to his comrades by brutally killing the enemy.³²

The audience is, however, confronted not only with the heroism of Arthur's men, but also with their tragic death. Lines 2146–52 are a lament for all those killed in war: Fair faces are disfigured, and bloodstained dying men lie sprawling on the ground; others, mortally wounded, are carried off by their galloping mounts. Gawain, 'the gude man of armes' (3858), is killed by Mordred, who stabs a knife into his brain (3856–7). Sir Lionel's skull is split open, the wound is as large as the breadth of a hand (2229). Sir Kay is killed from behind by a cowardly knight who pierces his flanks with a spear, breaking open his bowels and spilling his entrails (2171–6).

One further feature which, among others, is responsible for the anti-romantic character of the *AMA* is the poet's peculiar brand of humour which at times approaches a form similar to what we now call black humour. This term is applied to a technique in which 'grotesque or horrifying elements are sharply juxtaposed with humorous or farcical ones',³³ a literary feature that is by no means a modern phenomenon. As B. J. Friedman put it: 'I have a hunch Black Humor has probably always been around, always will.'³⁴ According to Mathew Winston, who draws a line between the absurd and grotesque shades of the technique, the grotesque form of black humour is 'obsessed with the human body, with the ways in which it can be distorted, separated into its component parts, mutilated, and abused.'³⁵

It is this very obsession with the human body and the ways it can be mutilated and distorted which forms one of the characteristics of the poet's narrative. A farcical element is introduced when the mutilation is ludicrously improbable. When Arthur kills the Egyptian prince who has slain Sir Kay, he first cuts both him and his horse clean in two, in a vertical direction, disembowelling the horse (2197–2203). Then Arthur in his rage meets another foe whom he strikes in two, this time horizontally. There is a comically grotesque picture of the man's torso toppling

to the ground, while his horse gallops away with the lower half of his body. This is followed by the ironical, even farcical comment of the narrator: 'Of þat hurte, alls I hope, heles he neuer' (2204-9).

Several of the so-called tags contain snide comments by the narrator, which relativise the gruesome descriptions. It is certainly ridiculous to say that a knight 'rode no more' after a spear has pierced his heart and he has fallen dead to the ground (2792-5). Another knight is described as speechless (2063) after a spear has pierced him, and splent and spleen stick to the spear (2061). Lucius is injured by a lance piercing his paunch. His stomach is decorated with the pennant of the lance, while the tip of the weapon juts out half a foot beyond his back (2073-80), and yet he is not dead. One hundred and fifty lines later Lucius reappears, obviously still alive, with the lance presumably still through him (2220).

When Arthur kills the giant Golapas, he first cuts him clean in two at the knees, and there is a grotesque picture of his upper half toppling down and a pair of legs standing on their own (2133-9). This is the same kind of description as that used by Heller in *Catch-22* when Kid Sampson is sliced in two by the propeller of a plane: '... and then there were just Kid Sampson's two pale, skinny legs, still joined by strings somehow at the bloody truncated hips, standing stock-still on the raft for what seemed a full minute or two before they toppled over backward into the water finally with a faint, echoing splash and turned completely upside down so that only the grotesque toes and the plaster-white soles of Kid Sampson's feet remained in view.'³⁶

Arthur calls out to Golapas in a grimly ironic tone that he'll make him even more handsome, and with that he cuts the giant's head off his torso — a macabre jest. The poet's comment is an ironic use of a proverb 'Thus he settez on seuen with his sekyre knyghttez' (2131); to 'set on seven' is an allusion to the creation of the world in seven days, and the phrase was transferred to men doing wonders and miracles.³⁷ To compare slaughter with God's creation stops just short of blasphemy.

Arthur himself has a weird, macabre sense of humour. After his victory against Lucius, he has the bodies of the emperor and of sixty senators and other knights embalmed and wrapped in silk and then in lead to preserve them. The coffins are strapped on camels and other mounts; the emperor's coffin is put on an elephant, a macabre bow to his higher rank. The king then calls an assembly saying to the captives 'Here are the chests with the taxes you wanted. This is the only tribute Rome will get from me' (2341-7). Arthur's word seems a grim joke, but one in keeping with the times. Froissart describes a similar form of cynicism in his *Chronicle*: 'Than the prince sayd to two of his squyers and to thre archers, Sirs, take the body of this knyght on a targe and bere him to Poycters, and present him fro me to the cardynall of Pyergourt, and say howe I salute hym by that token.'³⁸

IV

In the poem, Cradoke, the pilgrim, says he is going to Rome to get his pardon from the Pope, war or no war, and that he will probably come across Arthur who is waging war there, that 'noble' Lord with his 'awfull' knights (cf. 3493–3502). On the surface he utters admiring words for his king, but there is a second layer of meaning in which he criticises him for waging war, and thus stopping pilgrims from going to Rome. A contemporary audience would have appreciated the allusion to war versus pilgrimage. Finlayson talked of Arthur's 'just' war turning into an 'unjust' one.³⁹ There can be no doubt that the poet is saying that *every* war is unjust. It is not only the knights on the battlefield who lose their lives, but innocent people who suffer as a result. For the civilian population, plundering and pillaging are martyrdom. For the heroic aggressor, war is glory. In his *Tree of Battles* (1387), Honoré Bonet utters his discomfort and displeasure at the suffering of the people: 'My heart is full of grief to see and hear of the great martyrdom that they inflict without pity or mercy on the poor labourers and others who are incapable of ill in word or thought; who toil for men of all estates; from whom Pope, kings, and all the lords in the world receive, under God, what they eat and drink and what they wear. And no man is concerned for them . . .'⁴⁰ There was at least one who cared: the author of the *AMA*, who says that it is the 'comouns of þe countré, clergie and oþer. Þat are noghte coupable þerin, ne knowes noght in armez' who suffer (1316–17).

At the very beginning of the poem, the problem of how to justify war from a moral point of view is discussed. But although Arthur points out that legal justification for war is necessary, the Council disregards Arthur's reasoning and revenge is their only interest. Arthur is swayed by his knights and makes no further mention of the legal problem, thinking back on his own fame, honour and riches which he attributes to his men's heroism. So war begins and the black side of battle is skilfully portrayed by the poet with subtle change of perspective. In the first half of the poem, the author presents himself during long passages as one of Arthur's men. He also gives us a bird's eye view of the battlefield as seen by the victor. The apparent patriot talks of 'oure cheualrouse men' (1880, 2989), 'our lele knyghttez' (2998), 'oure valyant biernez' (1958) and uses other admiring epithets.

From Arthur's siege of Metz onwards, the author changes his position and is less willing to identify himself with Arthur's men. In his final lament for Arthur it is characteristic of his attitude towards 'his' sovereign that he no longer speaks of 'our king' but of 'this comlyche Kyng' (3218) and says bluntly 'Thus endis Kyng Arthure' (4342), with no romantic idea of his return from Avalon.

In describing Arthur's war in Tuscany the poet uses such words as 'wastys' (3156), 'vnsparely' (3160) and 'dispetouslye' (3159) which are

an obvious indication of his criticism of the wastefulness of war. It is Arthur who causes misery: 'wandrethe he wroghte' (3157) and he 'turmentez þe pople' (3153). Lines 3032–43 are similar to a description of a *chevauchée* in Edward's reign where villages were pillaged and burnt and everything devastated. The poet exclaims: 'The pyne of þe pople was peté for to here' (3043). After this brutal assault, the common people are seen streaming out of the town into the woods, helpless refugees clutching their goods and chattels (3068–71). In Metz, minsters, hospitals, churches and chapels are struck down and razed to the ground, and of course, houses and inns as well (3038–42). When the city of Como is besieged, the poet mentions poor people and herdsman who are leading the swine to pasture (3120–1). Arthur's men slay everyone in their path (3126). Eventually, all upper Italy is laid waste. Here, as in many other countries, Arthur 'has schedde myche blode and schalkes distroyede, Sakeles, in cirquyttrie' (3398–9).

The *AMA* poet was not alone in his condemnation of war. Gower, Wycliff, Brinton, Langland, Chaucer and Hoccleve are some of the names associated with the attack on war in the second half of the fourteenth century.⁴¹ Gower bitterly criticised the aristocrats for their greed and covetousness: 'It is nothing to you if the downtrodden people bewail their sufferings, provided that the general misfortune brings in money to you.'⁴²

The discussion was by no means restricted to court circles in London. The *AMA*, among other works, is proof of the fact that wider circles in England had become involved in the concern about the evils of war. Philosophers and theologians had fully recognised the devastating consequences of war. They were aware of the misery it inflicted on the common people. And yet they were still convinced that war was unavoidable because of man's inherent imperfection. For this reason it was not war itself that was called into question, but the justness or unjustness of individual conflicts. In numerous publications legal scholars attempted to codify the laws of war, and in so doing achieved such widespread recognition in Europe that their work can be regarded as the beginning of international martial law.⁴³

Wycliffites, however, adopted a progressively more radical position in regard to the question of war.⁴⁴ Several of Wycliff's pupils and followers voiced the opinion that war was sinful, whatever the reason behind it. Thus they concluded that war was unjustifiable — both from the secular and from the spiritual point of view. This revolutionary doctrine was made public in the famous Twelve Conclusions, which were nailed on the doors of Westminster Hall and St Paul's while Parliament was in session (1395). The most important points were as follows:

þe tende conclusiun is, þat manslaute be batayle or pretense lawe of rythwynesse for temporal cause or spirituel with outen special reuelaciun is expres contrarious to þe newe testament, þe qwicke is a lawe of grace

and ful of mercy. [. . .] But þe lawe of mercy, þat is þe newe testament, forbad al mannisslaute: *in euangelio dictum est antiquis. Non occides* [in the gospel it was said to them of old time. Thou shalt not kill; cf. Matt. 5. 12]. And [. . .] knyghtis, þat rennen to hethnesse to geten hem a name in sleinge of men, geten miche maugre [displeasure] of þe king of pes; for þe mekenesse and suffraunce oure beleue was multiplied, and fythteres and mansleeris Ihesu Cryst hatith and manasit. *Qui gladio percutit, gladio peribit* [all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword; cf. Matt. 26. 52].⁴⁵

Such partial statements, which from the point of view of the twentieth century would be styled pacifist, were regarded as a shocking provocation. Together with other Lollard tenets, they were condemned as heretic by the Pope and the English bishops.

It is probable that the author of the *AMA* was familiar with such ideas, although he was not a Lollard himself. From the very beginning of his poem he is critical of war and all things pertaining to it. In this respect he is unorthodox for his time. The poet exemplifies this message through the figures of Arthur and Gawain. Both live by the sword and die by the sword, and thus fulfil the Biblical passage quoted in the *Xth Conclusion*: 'They that take the sword shall perish with the sword.' At the same time, the fate of King Arthur is a warning example for the medieval concept of *contrapasso*: 'per que quis peccat, per idem punitur et ipse.' ('Wherewith one sins, therewith shall he be punished.')

⁴⁶

The *AMA* must be viewed as a kind of *Fürstenspiegel*, one not necessarily directed towards a historically identifiable ruler. It is a typological admonishment to every monarch involved in war. Arthur, in his pride and arrogance, has raised the banner of the dragon, meaning war, and has shed the blood of the innocent. The philosopher tells him: 'Thow has schedde myche blode and schalkes distroyede, Sakeles, in cirquytrie.' (3398–9).

It is one of the unsolved problems of this puzzling work, that the criticism levelled against unjust wars does not diminish the poet's enthusiasm for the description of war. The subject fascinated him, not only because he was more than familiar with the rich tradition of English heroic poetry. And yet all these heroic and war-like deeds are, in his opinion, proof of human iniquity and vainglory. Just as St Augustine admired the achievements of the great pagan philosophers, so, too, the poet of the *AMA* admired the war-like deeds of Arthur and his knights. Nevertheless he also views them as being 'awke' (13), and therefore *praeter viam* and sinful.⁴⁷

In conclusion we can say that the poet has used the conventions of romance, and the traditional personages and themes to present the problems of his own age. The *AMA* is a kind of death knell, a lament on the ideal of knightly ethos which is unmasked as a fiction incompatible with the reality of war and with Christian ethics. But King Arthur will not rise again in this world, for war has felled him like any other mortal.

The subject of the entire poem is the Death of Arthur, and as such it is also entitled *Morte Arthure* in two places: at the beginning and end of the manuscript. Much like Henry II, the poet evidently wanted to see Arthur safely in his grave, and therewith refute the myth of Arthur's second coming.⁴⁸

But even Chrétien de Troyes had voiced the premonition that Arthur's fame would last forever: 'I agree with the opinion of the Bretons that his name will live on for evermore.'⁴⁹

In a very similar way the poet has the philosopher say to King Arthur:

'This sall in romance be redde with ryall knyghttes.
Rekkenede and renownde with ryotous kynges.
And demyd on Domesdaye, for dedis of armes.
For þe doughtyeste þat euer was duellande in erthe;
So many clerkis and kynges sall karpe of zoure dedis.
And kepe zoure conquestez in cronycle for euer.' (3440-5)

This statement stands unreconciled beside the *vanitas-vanitatum* topos of the poem. Therefore it is by no means incomprehensible, or even illogical, that the scribe affixed the following inscription to the manuscript:

Hic jacet Arthurus, rex qondam rexque futurus.