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The History Of English Poetry

From The Close of the Eleventh To The Commencement of the Eighteenth
Century

Warton, Thomas

London, 1774

Section X. Various specimens of alliterative poetry. Antient alliterative
hymn to the Virgin Mary.

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S E C T. X.

LONGLAND's peculiarity of style and versification, seems to have had many cotemporary imitators. One of these is a nameless author on the fashionable history of Alexander the Great: and his poem on this subject is inserted at the end of the beautiful Bodleian copy of the French ROMAN D'ALEXANDRE, before mentioned, with this reference*. "Here fayleth a professe of this romaunce of "Alixaunder the whiche professe that fayleth ye schulle "fynde at the ende of thys boke ywrete in Engeliche ryme." It is imperfect, and begins and proceeds thus^b.

How Alexander partyd thennys^c.

When this weith at his wil wedinge
Hadde, fful rathe rommede he rydinge
Thedince so ondrace with his oft
Alixandre wendeth there wilde contre

* See above, p. 245. It is in a different hand yet with Saxon characters. See ad calc. cod. f. 209. It has miniatures in water colours.

^b There is a poem in the Ashmolean museum, complete in the former part, which I believe is the same. MSS. Ashm. 44. It has twenty-seven passus, and begins thus: Whener folk fastid and fed, fayne wolde thei her
Some farand thing, &c.

^c At the end are these rubrics, with void spaces, intended to be filled.

"How Alexandre remewid to a flood that
"is called Phison."

"How king Duidimus sente lettres to king
"Alexandre."

"How Duidimus enditid to Alexandre
"of here levyng."

"How he spareth not Alexandre to telle
"hym of hys governance."

"How he telleth Alexandre of his mau-
"metric."

"How Alexandre sente aunswere to Dui-
"dimus by lettres."

"How Duidimus sendyd an answere to
"Alexandre by lettre."

"How Alexandre sente Duidimus another
"lettre."

"How Alexandre pight a pelyr of marbyl
"ther."

Was

Was wift and wonderfull peple
 That weren proved ful proude, and prys of hevi helde
 Of bodi went thei thare withoute any wede
 And had grave on the ground many grete cavys
 There here wonnyng was wynturus and fomerus
 No fyte nor no sur stede sothli thei ne hadde
 But holus holwe in the grounde to hide hem inne
 Now is that name to mene the nakid wif
 Wan the kiddeste of the cavus that was kinge holde
 Hurde tydinge telle and loknyng wif
 That Alixaundre with his oft at lede thidince
 To beholden of hom hure hiezeft prynce
 Than waies of worshipe wittie and quaint
 With his lettres he let to the lud sende
 Thanne sounte thei sone the foresaide prynce
 And to the schamlese schalk schewen hur lettres
 Than rathe let the . . . reden the sonde
 That newe tythinge is tolde in this wif
 The gentil *Geneosophistians that gode were of witte
 To the emperour Alixandre here aunsweris wreten
 This is worschip of word worthi to have
 And in conquerer kid in contres manie
 Us is fertefyed seg as we soth heren
 That thou hast ment with the man among us ferre
 But yf thou kyng to us come with caere to figte
 Of us getist thou no good gome we the warne
 For what richeffe . . . us might you us bi reve
 Whan no wordliche wele is with us founde
 We ben fengle of us filse and semen ful bare
 Nouht welde we nowe but naked we wende
 And that we happili her haven of kynde
 May no man but god make us fine
 Thei thou sonde with thi folke to fighte us alle
 We schulle us kepe on caugt our cavns withinne
 Nevere werred we with wigth upon erthe

* Gymnosophists.

For

For we ben hid in oure holis or we harme laache hadde
 Thus faide sothli the loude that thi sente
 And al so cof as the king kende the sawe
 New lettres he let the bi take
 And with his sawes of soth he hem alle
 That he wolde faire with his folke in a faire wise
 To bi holden here home and non harme wurke
 So heth the king with hem sente and sithen with his peple
 cosli til hem to kenne of hure fare
 But whan thai sieu the seg with so manye ryde
 Thei war a grison of his grym and wende gref tholie
 Ffast heiede thei to holis and hidden there
 And in the cavus hem kept from the king sterne, &c.

Another piece, written in Longland's manner, is entitled,
 THE WARRES OF THE JEWES. This was a favourite subject,
 as I have before observed, drawn from the Latin historical
 romance, which passes under the name of HEGESIPPUS DE
 EXCIDIO HIERUSALEM.

In Tyberyus tyme the trewe emperour
 Syr Sesar hym self sayfed in Rome
 Whyle Pylot was provost under that prynce ryche
 And sewen justice also in Judeus londis
 Herodes under his empire as heritage wolde
 King of Galile was ycallid whan that Crist deyad
 They Sesar sakles wer that oft syn hatide
 Throw Pilet pyned he was and put on the rode
 A pyler pygt was don upon the playne erthe
 His body bouden therto beten with scourgis
 Whippes of quyrbol by went his white fides
 Til he al on rede blode ran as rayn on the strete
 Such stockyd hym an a stole with styf menes hondis
 Blyndfelled hym as a be and boffetis hym ragte
 Zif you be a prophete of pris prophecie they sayde

Which

Which man her aboute bolled the laste
 A thrange thorn crown was thraste on his hed
 . . . casten hym with a cry and on a cros slowen
 Ffor al the harme that he had hasted he nogt
 On hym the vyleny to venge that hys venys brosten
 Bot ay taried on the tyme gif they tone wolde
 Gaf he space that him spiled they he speede lyte
 Yf aynt was as yfynde and no fewer^d, &c.

Notwithstanding what has been supposed above, it is not quite certain, that Longland was the first who led the way in this singular species of versification. His *VISION* was written on a popular subject, and is the only poem, composed in this capricious sort of metre, which has been printed. It is easy to conceive how these circumstances contributed to give him the merit of an inventor, on this occasion.

The ingenious doctor Percy has exhibited specimens of two or three other poems belonging to this class. One of these is entitled *DEATH AND LIFE*: it consists of two hundred and twenty-nine lines, and is divided into two parts or *Fitts*. It begins thus:

Christ christen king that on the cros tholed,
 Hadde paines and passyons to defend our soules;
 Give us grace on the ground the greatye to serve
 For that royall red blood that rann from thy side.

The subject of this piece is a *VISION*, containing a contest for superiority between *Our lady Dame LIFE*, and the *ugly fiend*

^d Laud. . . 22. MSS. Bibl. Bodl. Ad calc. "Hic tractatur bellum Judaicum apud Jerusalem." f. 19. b. It is also in Brit. Mus. Cott. MSS. CALIG. A. 1. fol. 109. —123. Gyraldus Cambrensis says, that the Welsh and English use alliteration, "in omni sermone exquisito." Descript. Cambr. cap. xi. p. 889. O'Flaherty also says of the Irish, "Non parvæ est apud nos in oratione

"elegantiae schema, quod Paromæon, i. e. *Affinale*, dicitur: quoties multæ dictiones, ab eadem litera incipientes, ex ordine collocantur." Ogyg. part. iii. 30. p. 242. See also Dr. Percy's judicious Essay on the METRE OF PIERCE PLOWMAN'S VISIONS.

^e Essay on the Metr. of P. P. Vif. p. 8. seq.

Dame

Dame DEATH: who with their severall attributes and concomitants are personified in a beautiful vein of allegorical painting. *Dame LIFE* is thus forcibly described.

Shee was brighter of her blee than was the bright sonn:
 Her rud redder than the rose that on the rise hangeth:
 Meekely smiling with her mouth, and merry in her lookes;
 Ever laughing for love, as shee like would:
 And as she came by the bankes the boughes eche one
 They lowted to that ladye and layd forth their branches;
 Blossomes and burgens breathed full sweete,
 Flowers flourished in the frith where she forth stepped,
 And the grasse that was gray grened belive.

The figure of *DEATH* follows, which is equally bold and expressive. Another piece of this kind, also quoted by doctor Percy, is entitled *CHEVELERE ASSIGNE, OR DE CIGNE*, that is the *Knight of the Swan*. This is a romance which is extant in a prose translation from the French, among Mr. Garrick's noble collection of old plays¹. We must not forget, that among the royal manuscripts in the British Museum, there is a French metrical romance on this subject, entitled *L'YSTOIRE DU CHEVALIER AU SIGNE*². Our English poem begins thus³:

All-weldyng god, whence it is his wylle,
 Wele he wereth his werke with his owene honde,
 For ofte harmes were hente that help wene mygte

¹ K. vol. 10. "Imprinted at London by me Wylliam Copland." There is an edition on parchment by W. de Worde, 1512. "Newly translated out of Frenshe into Englyshe at thinfligacion of the puyssaunt prynce lorde Edward duke of Buckyngame." Here I understand French prose.

² 15 E. vi. 9. fol. And in the Royal library at Paris, MS. 7192. "Le Roman du Chevalier au Cigne en vers." Montf. Cat. MSS. ii. p. 789.

³ See MSS. Cott. CALIG. A. i. f. 109. 123.

Nere the hygnes of hem that lengeth in hevenc
For this, &c.

This alliterative measure, unaccompanied with rhyme, and including many peculiar Saxon idioms appropriated to poetry, remained in use so low as the sixteenth century. In doctor Percy's *Antient Ballads*, there is one of this class called THE SCOTTISH FEILDE, containing a very circumstantial narrative of the battle of Flodden fought in the year 1513.

In some of the earliest of our specimens of old English poetry¹, we have long ago seen that alliteration was esteemed a fashionable and favourite ornament of verse. For the sake of throwing the subject into one view, and further illustrating what has been here said concerning it, I chuse to cite in this place a very antient hymn to the Virgin Mary, never printed, where this affectation professedly predominates².

I.

Hail beo yow¹ Marie, moodur and may,
Mylde, and meke, and merciabile;
Heyl folliche fruit of sothfast fay,
Agayn vche stryf studefast and stable!
Heil sothfast soul in vche a fay,
Undur the son is non so able.
Heil logge that vr lord in lay,
The formast that never was founden in fable,
Heil trewe, trouthfull, and tretable,
Heil cheef i chofen of chastite,
Heil homely, hende, and amyable
To preye for us to thi sone so fre! AVE.

¹ See Sect. i.

² Among the Cotton manuscripts there is a Norman Saxon alliterative hymn to the Virgin Mary. NER. A. xiv. f. 240. cod. membran. 8^{vo}. "On ȝob ureifun to ure "leidi." That is, *A good prayer to our lady.*

Crijter milbe mober reynre Marie
Mines hues leonie, mi leoue leybi.

¹ See some pageant-poetry, full of alliteration, written in the reign of Henry the seventh, Leland. Coll. iii. App. 180. edit. 1770.

II. Heil

II.

Heil stern, that never stinteth liht;
 Heil bush, brennyng that never was brent;
 Heil rihtful rulere of everi riht,
 Schadewe to schilde that scholde be schent.
 Heil, blessed be yowe blosme briht,
 To trouthe and trust was thine entent;
 Heil mayden and modur, most of miht,
 Of all mischeves and amendement;
 Heil spice sprong that never was spent,
 Heil trone of the trinitie;
 Heil soiene^m that god us sone to sent
Yowe preye for us thi sone fre! AVE.

III.

Heyl hertely in holinesse.
 Heyl hope of help to heighe and lowe,
 Heyl strength and stel of stabylnesse,
 Heyl wyndowe of hevене wowe,
 Heyl reson of rihtwysnesse,
 To vche a caityf comfort to knowe,
 Heyl innocent of angernesse,
 Vr takel, vr tol, that we on trowe,
 Heyl frend to all that beoth forth flowe
 Heyl liht of love, and of bewte,
 Heyl brihter then the blod on snowe,
Yow preye for us thi sone so fre! AVE.

IV.

Heyl mayden, heyl modur, heyl martir trowe,
 Heyl kyndly i knowe confessor,
 Heyl evenere of old lawe and newe,
 Heyl buildor bold of cristes bour,

^m F. Seyen. *Seyon.*
 S f 2

Heyl

Heyl rose higest of hyde and hewe,
 Of all ffuytes feirest flour,
 Heyl turtell trustiest and trewe,
 Of all trouthe thou art tresour,
 Heyl puyred princeffe of paramour,
 Heyl blosme of breere brihtest of ble,
 Heyl owner of eorthly honour,
Yowe preye for us thi sone so fre! AVE, &c.

V.

Heyl hende, heyl holy emperesse,
 Heyle queene corteois, comely, and kynde,
 Heyl distruyere of everi strisse,
 Heyl mender of everi monnes mynde,
 Heil bodi that we ouht to blesse,
 So feythful frend may never mon fynde,
 Heil levere and lovere of largenessse
 Swete and swetest that never may swynde,
 Heil botenere of everie bodi blynde,
 Heil borgun brihtes of all bounte,
 Heyl trewore then the wode bynde,
Yow preye for us thi sone so fre! AVE.

VI.

Heyl modur, heyl mayden, heyl hevne quene,
 Heyl gatus of paradys,
 Heyl sterre of the se that ever is sene,
 Heyl riche, royall, and ryhtwys,
 Heyl burde i blessed mote yowe bene,
 Heyl perle of al perey the pris,
 Heyl schadewe in vche a schour schene,
 Heyl fairer thae that flour de lys,

Heyl

Heyl cher chofen that never nas chis
 Heyl chef chamber of charite
 Heyl in wo that ever was wis
Yowe preye for us thi fone fo fre! AVE, &c. &c *.

These rude stanzas remind us of the Greek hymns ascribed to Orpheus, which entirely consist of a cluster of the appellations appropriated to each divinity.

* MS. Vernon. f. 122. In this manuscript are several other pieces of this sort.

SECT.