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335

136

KING ARTHUR'S DEATH

*Alliterative Morte Arthure and
Stanzaic Le Morte Arthur*

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Of all that Alexander had in his earthly life.' 4160

Then Sir Ewain and Sir Eric, excellent warriors,
Attacked the enemy troops, striking intrepidly.
They chopped down with sharp swords the chief men
Of the Orcadian heathens and Irish kings,
Hacking those hulks of men with their hardened weapons,
Felling to earth those fighters with fearsome blows.
Shoulders and shields they shredded down to the
haunches,

And grinding through mail, they gashed gizzards asunder.
Earthly king never had such honour in battle
On his ending day except Arthur alone. 4170

But the drought of the day dried up their hearts,
So that drinkless both died – dread pity it was!

Now Sir Mordred the Malebranche and his mighty host
Moved against our middle-guard and mingled with them.

He had hidden behind at the edge of the wood,
His troops on the ground intact, to our distress.
He had studied the struggle from start to finish,
And the achievement of our chivalry by chance of arms,
And knowing our folk were fight-weary and fated to die,
He swiftly decided to assault the King. 4180

But the churlish chicken changed his device:

Instead of his scalloped saltire,¹ which he forsook,

He bore aloft three lions all in glittering silver,

Passant, on purple cloth, with precious stones,

So that the King should not know him, cunning wretch.

Because of his cowardice he had cast off his own device,

But the splendid sovereign straight away recognized him,

And called out to Sir Cador these characteristic words:

'Here comes the traitor, eagerly cantering forward;

That lad with the lions looks just like him. 4190

If I once get hold of him, he shall suffer hardship

1. 4182 Saltire: shaped like the cross of St Andrew.

off

For all his treason and trickery, as I am a true lord.
Today Clarent and Excalibur shall clearly show in conflict
Which cuts the more cleanly or has the keener edge.
We shall try tested steel against tested armour.
I kept Clarent as my clean darling, accounted it precious,
And kept it for crowning consecrated kings.
On days when I dubbed dukes and earls
It was bravely borne by its bright hilts.
I never dared to damage it in deeds of arms, 4200
But always kept it clean because of my purposes.
Now I see Clarent unscabbarded, crown of all swords.
I am aware that my wardrobe at Wallingford is plundered;
No one knew where it was but Guinevere alone;
She herself had safekeeping of that sword of high renown,
And the close-locked coffers belonging to the crown,
With the rings and relics and regalia of France
'That were found on Sir Frolo when he was felled and left
dead.'

Then Sir Merrak met Mordred in maddened mood
And smote him mightily with a battered mace. 4210
The edge of his helmet he hacked off
And the bright red blood bubbled down his corslet.
Mordred faltered under the fierce pain, and his face went
pale,

But he gave battle like a cornered boar and struck back.
He shook out a bright sword shining like silver,
Which was Arthur's own, and had been Uther his father's,
Which was wont to be kept at Wallingford in the armoury,
And with it the dread dog dealt such dire blows
That the other drew back some distance, daring nothing
more,

For Sir Merrak was a man undermined by age, 4220
And Sir Mordred was mighty and in his utmost strength.
Neither knight nor any other could come within the
compass

Of that sword's swing without spilling his lifeblood.

Our Prince perceived it, and pressed fast forward,
Hurling through the host with his whole strength.
There he met Mordred and with full malice said,
'Turn, untrue traitor, your time is up!
By the great God I shall give you your death-blow,
And no rescue or ransom shall reach you from any man!
The sovereign struck him staunchly with Excalibur, 4230
Shearing off the corner of the shining shield
And hitting a hand's-breadth deep into the shoulder,
So that the bright red blood blazoned the mail.
Mordred shuddered and shivered, but shrank back little,
Rather shot forward sharply in his shining gear,
And the felon struck fiercely with that fine sword,
Ripping through the rib-plates on Arthur's right side.
'Through surcoat and hauberk of armoured steel
The hilding hacked off a half-foot of flesh.
That deadly blow brought his death, and dread pity it was 4240
That the dauntless man should die but by God's decreeing!
Yet still with his sword Excalibur he struck nobly,
Guarding himself guilefully with his glittering shield,
And slashed off Mordred's sword hand as he surged past.
An inch from the elbow he hacked it clean off,
So that Mordred sank down and swooned in the dust;
Yes, through brassard of bright steel and brilliant mail,
And hilt and hand upon the heath were left lying.
Then deftly he dragged that devil upright again
And broached him with the blade to the bright hilts, 4250
So that he squirmed on the sword-point in his
death-struggle.

'In faith,' said the fated king, 'it fills me with grief
'That such a false felon should have so fair a death.'
'That fight being finished, the field was won,
And the false folk on the field were left to their fate.
'They fled to the forest and fell in the thickets

Arthur Sorrows over the Dead

As our fierce fighters followed after them,
Hunting and hacking down the heathen dogs,
And smiting dead in the mountains Sir Mordred's knights.
Not one man got away, warrior or chieftain; 4260
All were chopped down in the chase, and cheap was the
cost.

But when the King came to the corpses of Sir Ewain
And Eric most honourable, and other great lords,
He caught up Sir Cador, consumed with grief,
And Sir Cleges and Sir Clermond, keen warriors,
Sir Lot and Sir Lionel, Sir Lancelot and Lowes,
Merrak and Meneduke, ever mighty in battle,
And grieved as he laid them together on the ground,
Loudly lamenting as he looked on their bodies,
Like a man hating life and lost to joy. 4270

Then in a stupor he staggered, and his strength failed.
He looked up to heaven, and all his face changed;
He swayed and sank down, suddenly swooning.
Then he clambered to his knees, crying and calling:
'O King rightly crowned, in care I am left!
All my lordship is laid low to the ground.
'Those who gave me gifts through the grace of God,
Maintained my majesty by their might in battle
And set me up in honour as Earth's master,
In a terrible time this trouble has come to them, 4280
That through a traitor all my true lords are taken in death.
Here rests the rich blood of the Round Table,
Squandered by a scoundrel, which is scalding sadness.
Helpless on the heath I must house alone
Like a woebegone widow bewailing her man.
I may curse and cry and clasp my hands in grief,
For my strength and prestige are stopped for ever.
I take leave of all lordship till my life ends.
Here the blood of the Britons is borne out of life,
Here all my happiness ends today.' 4290

Dying, Arthur Bequeaths His Crown

Then the Round Tablers rallied their ranks,
And to their royal ruler they rode all together.
Swiftly were assembled seven score knights
In sight of their sovereign sinking in death.
The crowned King knelt, crying aloud:
'With goodwill, God, I give thanks for thy grace
In vouchsafing us the virtue to vanquish our enemy,
And granting us glorious victory over those great lords.
You never stained us with dishonour or disgrace,
But always handed us overlordship of all other kings. 4300
To look for our lords we have no leisure now,
For that craven caitiff has quite crippled me.
Let us go now to Glastonbury – it is our only good
course –

To repose in peace and repair our wounds.
For this precious day's process, praised be the Lord,
Who has destined us the doom of dying in our own land.'

They wholeheartedly then held to his behest,
And went the swiftest way to Glastonbury.
They entered the Isle of Avalon, where Arthur dismounted
And made his way to a manor: he could move no farther. 4310
A surgeon from Salerno searched his wound,
But the King could tell that he would never recover,
And straight away he said to his staunch followers:
'Call me a confessor with Christ in his hands,
For I must speedily receive the sacrament, come what
may.

My cousin Constantine shall wear the crown,
As becomes a kinsman, if Christ permit.
Bear my blessing, men, in burying these lords
Who were slaughtered by sword in the struggle today.
Then be stern and see that the offspring of Mordred 4320
Are secretly slain and slung into the sea:
Let no wicked weed wax twisting on this earth!
I urge you, for your honour's sake, do all as I bid.

Arthur Dies and is Mourned

All offences I forgive, for heavenly Christ's love;
And if Guinevere has done well, well may she prosper!
He strongly said 'In manus' as he lay stretched out,
And so passed his spirit: he spoke no more.

Then the baronage of Britain, bishops and others,
Shaped with shuddering hearts to go to Glastonbury
To bury their brave sovereign, bearing him to earth 4330
With all the honour and high ceremony any man could
have.

They had the bells rung and chanted the Requiem,
And sang masses and matins in mournful tones.
Religious men arrayed in their rich capes,
Pontiffs and prelates in precious robes,
All the dukes and dignitaries dressed in mourning,
Countesses kneeling and clasping their hands,
Ladies languishing and looking forlorn,
And girls too, all garbed in garments of black,
Surrounded the sepulchre with their tears streaming down; 4340
So sorrowful a sight was never seen in their time.

Thus ended King Arthur, as old authors affirm.
Of Hector's blood was he, son of the Trojan king,
And kin to Sir Priamus, a prince praised the world over.
From Troy the Britons brought all his brave ancestors
To Britain the Greater, as the Brut records.

'Here lies Arthur, king once and king to be
Here ends Morte Arthure written by Robert of Thornton 4348
May the said R. Thornton, who wrote this, be blessed. Amen

1. 4347-9 These three lines are not by the poet. The first, in Latin, which is the inscription on Arthur's tomb, is in a hand different from the scribe's. Then there is Thornton's line, in English. The last line, again in Latin, was written by a late-fifteenth-century reader.

151