THE JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY
FROM MERLIN TO SHAKESPEARE.

ADVENTURES OF AN ENGLISH PROPHECY.

The Latin MS. 210 [R. 39882] in the John Rylands Library consists of three manuscripts written in the XIVth and bound together in the XVth century. It contains three theological treatises by John Waldeby, a hermit of St. Augustine, a set of Exempla ascribed, probably erroneously, to Jacques de Vitry, a treatise on the ten capital sins by Robert Grosseteste, and another devotional treatise on the Ten Commandments. One of the characteristic features of this manuscript is that, although it consists mainly of Latin texts, a contemporary hand has added some fragments in vernacular on the blank leaves, while in the treatise on the Commandments the text of each commandment is given in English rhyme before its Latin commentary. Our manuscript is therefore an illustration of the passing of the Latin language and the revival of English.

One of the English additions is a “prophecy” in which an unknown writer laments the times on which he is fallen, and foretells the confusion of England which shall follow certain signs. We print below a transcription of this text with a translation into modern English. A part of it (lines 3-10), under the title of “Prosperity” and with a distinctly more modern orthography, is found in the MS. Arch. Selden. B. 24 in the Bodleian Library, where it follows Chaucer’s poem on “Truth” and where it is itself ascribed to Chaucer. As such it was printed by R. Morris in his edition of Chaucer in 1866 (t. VI. p. 296). It is rejected by W. W. Skeat in his critical edition. But as far as we are able to discover in the absence of that most desirable catalogue of Initia which we hope some English university will some day undertake, the full text of this little poem has never been published.

As far as we are able to judge after a short study, the language of our fragment does not permit us to determine exactly to what part of England its author belonged; he was probably of the Midlands, but that is all we will venture to say. His date may be surmised with more probability to be the middle of the fourteenth century; his prosody is a mixture of octosyllabic, decasyllabic, and Alexandrine

lines arranged now in couplets now in quatrains and interrupted by three alliterative lines containing no rhymes; a fitting measure in which to record the chaotic state of affairs which his lines lament.

WHANNE LYF YS MOST LOUSED AND DETH IS MOST HATYD
Deth drawyth his drawt and makyth man ful nakyd,
Ry5t as pouerte cawsyth soburnesse
And febelnesse enforsyth contynence,

5 Ry5t so prosperite and syknesse
Be modure of vice and necligence,
And powere also cawsyt insolence
And hy3 onewr changyt gode jewys.

There is no more perilous pestilense

10 Than hi;5 astat 5even unto shrewys.
Pes makyth plente, plente makyth prouyd,
Proyde makyth ple, ple makyth pouert, pouert makyth pees,
As perefore grace growyth after gouernawnce.

Whenne lordis wol lose har olde lawys

15 And prestis bouth varynnge in har sawys,
And lecherye is holde solas
And oppressyon for purchas

19 be ny5 to his confusyon.

Translation: When life is most loved, and death most hated—
death draweth his shaft and maketh man all naked.—Even as poverty causeth soberness—and feebleness enforceth continence,—right so prosperity and sickness—be mother of vice and negligence,—and power also causeth insolence,—and high honour changeth good servants.—There is no more perilous pestilence—than high estate given unto shrews.—Peace maketh plenty, plenty maketh pride,—pride maketh strife, strife maketh poverty, poverty maketh peace;
even as grace groweth after governance.—When lords shall lose their old laws,—and priests shall vary in their precepts,—and lechery is held for solace,—and oppression for purchase,—then shall the land of Albion—be nigh to her confusion.

This little poem appears to have had an extensive vogue. Its last six lines became a popular saying, which we find in more or less varying forms now as “Chaucer’s prophecy,” now as “Merlin’s”.

As “Chaucer’s prophecy” it appears in the Aldine edition of Chaucer in the following form:

1 In front of lines 14-17 the scribe has added prophetia.

Gwan prestis faylin in her sawes
And Lordis turnin Goddis lawes
Ageynis ryt
And lecherie is holdin as privy solas
And robberie as fre purchas
Beware thanne of ilIe
Then schall the Lond of Albion
Turnin to confusioun
As sumtyme it befelle.1

The editor states2 he found this text "on the flyleaf of a miscel-
laneous old MS. containing the Meditations of St. Anselm, and other
devotional pieces in Latin. The date at the end of the volume, but
in a different hand, is M. CCC. LXXXI.". But he does not tell us
what this manuscript really is, so that from his indications it is impossible
to trace it.

Caxton, in his small quarto edition of Chaucer, prints on the blank
space left on the last leaf the following "saying," which with his usual
wisdom he does not ascribe to anybody, and in which it is easy to
recognise a slightly different redaction of our text:—

Whan feyth faileth in prestes sawes
And lorde hes estes ar holden for lawes
And robberie is holden purchas
And lechery is holden solas
Than shal the Lond of Albyon
Be brought to grete conlusioun.3

The gentleman who wrote in 1589 the book known as the "Arte
of Poesie," and who is generally called George Puttenham,4 was less
cautious than the illustrious printer, and inserted in his work the same
saying in a form again slightly different, but ascribing it with a certain
emphasis to Geoffrey Chaucer:—

"Sir Geoffrey Chaucer, father of our English Poets, hath these
verses following the distributor:—

When faith failes in Preestes sawes,
And Lords estes are holden for lawes,
And robberie is tane for purchase,
And lechery for solace,

1 eod. loc.
2 Ibid.
    London, 1869, 4to.
Then shall the Realme of Albion
Be brought to great confusion."  

Needless to say that recent Chaucerian scholars do not admit the authenticity of this piece.

In Puttenham's own time, moreover, this saying was attributed by public opinion to a perhaps more illustrious and certainly more fabulous source, to none other than Merlin Ambrosius, Geoffrey of Monmouth's prophet, whose "prophesies," first launched in the XIIth century, did not cease to be reproduced and added to till at least the XVIIth. For we find in Shakespeare's King Lear among further examples of these popular "sayings" a last echo of our XIVth century model.

In Act III. Scene 2, at the close of the scene the fool speaks a prophesy which in the main differs from our text, but of which the first line and two of the last are evidently taken from the same source:

Fool. I'll speak a prophecy ere I go:—
When priests are more in word than matter; 81
When brewers mar their malt with water;
When nobles are their tailor's tutors;
No heretics burn'd, but wenches' suitors;
When every case in law is right; 85
No squire in debt, no poor knight;
When slanders do not live in tongues,
Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;
When usurers till their gold i' th' field,
And bowds and whoris do churches build,
Then shall the realm of Albion
Come to great confusion.
Then comes the time, who lives to see 't,
That going shall be used with feet.
This prophecy Merlin 4 shall make; for I live before his time. 95

2 See The Life of Merlin Surnamed Ambrosius, his Prophecies and Predictions [by Thomas Heywood]. London, 1641, 4to. Nothing similar to our text is to be found among the numerous prophecies referring to all times contained in Heywood's work, but we note on page 361 the following remark: "Many other prophesies have beene dispersd abroad under the name of Merlin". It is perhaps needless to add that countless examples of prophecies of Merlin and others were current for centuries in France as in England. The most famous and unquenchable is perhaps the prophecy ascribed to Malachi, which was quoted at the time of the last papal elections.
3 We acknowledge with pleasure our debt to Dr. Rendell Harris who called our attention to the Shakespeare text, and thereby, in fact, to all the others.
4 Another reference to Merlin's prophecies appears in Henry IV. Part . Act III. Scene 1, lines 146-53.
It appears to be doubtful if this passage is Shakespeare’s or an addition made by an actor. In any case, be it addition or genuine text, for the general public our prophecy thus survives as part of one of the masterpieces of English literature.

In conclusion, we may observe that, in spite of the variations we have noted in the text itself, the rhythm remains exactly the same. This is, in fact, very natural, a prophecy being a kind of consecrated formula of which the rhythm, perhaps an old magical survival, is an essential part.

The persistence of such prophecies is also not difficult to explain. Do not the “signs of the times” remain much the same from age to age, and if we are in the mood, may we not, for instance, see at the present time all the portents from which our mediæval pessimist spells such confusion?

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FURTHER NOTES ON THE JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY LATIN MANUSCRIPT No. 15 (ST. CYPRIAN).

The courtesy of the Editor has enabled me to add some interesting notes on the history of this manuscript. Those communicated to him by Monsieur Emile Radé, sub-librarian of the town of Colmar, have shed welcome light on the history of the manuscript during the middle period of last century, and both the Librarian of the John Rylands Library and myself desire to render him our cordial thanks for his kind communication.

The Cyprian manuscript doubtless remained in the Murbach library till 1791, at which date it was, along with the other books in the library, transferred to the Colmar town library. By the middle of the nineteenth century it had already somehow come into the possession of Canon Maimbourg, parish priest of Colmar. While it was in his possession, to be exact, in the year 1846, Dom (afterwards Cardinal) Pitra saw it, and wrote out the following description:—