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Résumé – *Chinon of England*, roman anglais de Christopher Middleton (1597), raconte l'histoire d'un jeune homme qui se décide à chercher des aventures en France. Il réussit à retirer une épée enfoncée dans un bloc de pierre et devient bientôt chevalier de la Table Ronde. Ensuite, les éléments arthuriens disparaissent pratiquement, exception faite de la présence de Lancelot, Tristram et Triamore, dont les rôles s'éclipsent devant une série d'aventures de plus en plus exotiques et farfelues.

Abstract – The 1597 romance *Chinon of England* by Christopher Middleton presents the adventures of Chinon, a young man who is suddenly inspired to pursue adventure. Ensuing episodes present a curious sword in the stone test (arranged by Oberom/Oberon) and Chinon's joining the Round Table fellowship, but otherwise the work offers elaborate, exotic, and far-fetched adventures, in which the only remnant of Arthurian tradition is the presence of Tristram, Lancelot, and the lesser-known Triamore.

"CODA": *CHINON OF ENGLAND* (1597), OR THE LIMITS OF ROMANCE

The end of the sixteenth century and all of the seventeenth have traditionally been considered a place where Arthurian stories go to die. This contention is not easily refuted, but there are some notable exceptions, such as Spenser's 1599 *Faerie Queene*, Thomas Hughes's *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (performed before Elizabeth I in 1588), and Ben Jonson's *The Speeches at Prince Henry's Barriers* (1610). These and a handful of other authors took Arthurian themes seriously, even though they generally used them, not as literary models, but as sources of thematic inspiration. That is, they tended to use Arthurian motifs and characters to offer lessons concerning contemporary political events, such as the danger of civil war or, especially when performed before the queen, the importance of loyalty to the crown. In recent years, a number of scholars have taken a fresh look at post-medieval Arthurian romance in general and have moved beyond the notion that Arthur very nearly ceased to interest the reading public and publishers alike[1]. But by its contents, its style, and the compositional deficiencies of its author, *Chinon of England* stands well apart from the majority of Arthurian romances composed at the time on either side of the Channel.

Several years ago, a library search for John Leland's 1544 *Assertio inclytissimi Arturii regis Britanniae*, in which he described the exhumation of Arthur's body at Glastonbury and contended that he had personally handled the famous leaden cross, yielded an unexpected bonus.

1 Progressively though haltingly, sixteenth-century Arthurian texts are being studied, edited, and translated, and if *Chinon* hardly burnishes the reputation of Arthurian romance at the end of that century, it does offer at least additional evidence of the continuing interest in, or use of, Arthurian themes. For a major contribution to the revision of traditional views, notably in France, see J. H. M. Taylor, *Rewriting Arthurian Romance in Renaissance France: From Manuscript to Printed Book*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2014; Taylor offers evidence of the appeal of Arthuriana during the French Renaissance, identifying new works as well as the numbers of reprints and renewals of earlier compositions.

Bound in the same volume as Leland's treatise was *The Famous Historie of Chinon of England*, by Christopher Middleton[1]. The latter text was published in London in 1597, then edited by William Edward Mead for the Early English Text Society in 1925. It obviously made scarcely a ripple, much less a wave, between 1597 and 1925, and even after the latter date it appears to have remained largely unnoticed despite a 1971 reprint by Kraus[2].

Information about this romance was not easily located. An initial source was *The Arthurian Annals* by Daniel P. Nastali and Phillip C. Boardman, who have catalogued all Arthurian texts published in English between 1250 and 2000. *Chinon* was indeed listed there, and the compilers quote Margaret Schlauch's 1963 judgment that the romance is made "almost unintelligible by turgid language and a confused plot"[3]. Beyond that, there is little information to be found[4], and it does not

1 C. Middleton, *The Famous Historie of Chinon of England, with his strange adventures for the love of Celestina daughter to Lewis King of Fraunce. With the worthy Atchivement of Sir Lancelot du Lake, and Sir Tristram du Lions for faire Laura, daughter to Cador Earle of Cornewall, beeing all Knights of King Arthurs round Table*, London, John Danter for Cuthbert Burbie, 1597; ed. W. E. Mead for the Early English Text Society, 1925; page numbers given in this article are those in Mead's edition. Middleton (1560?-1628) published, in addition to *Chinon*, a manual to teach swimming (1595); a collection of previous poetry and astronomers' observations, entitled *The Historie of Heaven* (1596); and *The Legend of Humphrey, Duke of Glocester* (1600); see J. Simons, "Christopher Middleton and Elizabethan Medievalism", *Medievalism in the Modern World*, ed. R. J. Utz and T. A Shippey, Turnhout, Brepols, 1998, p. 43-60, at p. 50-51. It should be noted that the title page is misleading: Chinon will in the end marry Cassiopeia, not Celestina.

2 A. J. App offers something of an exception to this statement. In his *Lancelot in English Literature: His Role and Character*, 2 vols, Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America, 1929, repr. New York, Haskell House, 1965, II p. 106-111, he offers a summary of the romance but then, as his title indicates, concentrates on Lancelot's role rather than on the work as a whole. Another plot summary, slightly more detailed than the one in the present article, is included in David McInnis's website, "Lost Plays Database"; at that site search "Chinon of England", which there is discussed as the likely source of a lost drama.

3 From M. Schlauch's *Antecedents of the English Novel*, London, Oxford University Press, 1963, p 171. See D. P. Nastali and P. C. Boardman, *The Arthurian Annals: The Tradition in English from 1250 to 2000*, 2 vols, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, vol. 1, p. 26. On the previous page (p. 25), Nastali and Boardman document a drama titled *Chinone of Ingland* in 1596 but consider it unlikely that the play was the source for the romance. Rather, the dramatic work "… may have been based on an unknown earlier edition of the romance or even on a manuscript version".

4 There are a few passing references to *Chinon* in H. Cooper's *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*, Oxford, Oxford

appear that any study, however brief, has been devoted specifically to this furtive text[1].

Chinon of England is a euphuistic text, characterized most obviously by extensive use of alliteration and the prodigious length of sentences. The following is an excerpt – only about one-third – of a letter written by Lancelot to Laura, who, in this text, has replaced Guenevere as Lancelot's love interest:

> "Thus what I doe or what I suffer, what I presently possesse, or whatsoever I shall have, I sacrifice at thy Altar, as propitiatorie offrings, and with the sad sighes of a sorrowful hart, cense thy sacred shrine, still intreating but this, that thou wouldest gently accept these rude lines of a rude Lover, and when discontented distance shall divorce me from thy Angelicall presence, thou wouldest at the least pittie my sorrow, though thou wilt not salve my sore". (p. 11)

The narrative opens on the presentation of siblings: a beautiful and wise young woman named Laura and her dolt of a brother, Chinon, a young man with neither ambition nor apparent intelligence. He generally lies around the house doing nothing, and he might remind the reader of Aucassin except that the latter's inactivity was the result of lovesickness[2]. And Chinon has neither love nor any other reason for his torpor.

Meanwhile, as Lancelot prepares to leave in order to seek adventure in France, he writes to Laura the love letter quoted above[3]. Then a trio of knights (Lancelot, Tristram, and Sir Triamore[4]) participate in a tourney at the court of the French King Lewis, in which the prizes are three: a marvelous bed (an unusual but doubtless practical gift for the object of one's love), a wonderful suit of armor, and the hand of the king's daughter, Celestina. Triamore and Celestina love each other, but that

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University Press, 2004, p. 39-40, 423, 428. In addition, an inquiry to Alan Lupack of the University of Rochester revealed (unsurprisingly, given his encyclopedic knowledge of Arthuriana) that he had not only heard of the romance but immediately recalled a number of the plot elements.

1 Simons, "Christopher Middleton and Elizabethan Medievalism" (cited above, n.1 p.442), does devote a number of pages to the romance, but he is interested in its sources. He does offer a perceptive observation, noting that Middleton "… is desperately trying to please everyone and the result … is fairly chaotic" (p. 59).

2 See *Aucassin et Nicolette*, ed. M. Roques, Paris, Champion, 1962, p. 2, 8, and *passim*.

3 The syntax of this title (see above, n.1 p.442) seems to imply that it is Tristram who loves Laura, but the text leaves no doubt that it is Lancelot.

4 Who plays a significant role, as king of Wales, in the Middle English *Sir Tristrem*.

love is complicated because she is desired also by the son of the sultan of Babylon. Lancelot defeats him, presents Celestina to Triamore, and sends the bed and armor back to Laura.

When the prizes are delivered, they are accompanied by lavish praise for Sir Lancelot's remarkable prowess, and that account suffices to awaken Chinon's ambition. In a single gargantuan sentence, Chinon

> suddainelie sollicited his old sorrow tyred sire, that hee would thus far further his intent, as to graunt him leaue a while to forsake his natiue soyle, and learne thus to aduenture for honor in far forraine lands, whose instant intreatie not brooking the deferring of further delay, earnestly vrged his now more fortunate Father to further so his forward Sonne (p. 21)

and then, "with the well willing wishes of all his friendly favorites", he leaves for France to seek his glory.

The sultan of Babylon, understandably displeased by his son's death, takes Celestina captive. The three knights who fought in the tournament make plans to rescue her, but in this romance, complications often trump intentions. And so, when the knights come upon a cave and enter it, a monster blocks their exit with a huge rock. This monster has the face of a beautiful woman, the body of a serpent, the hands of a man, and the legs of an elephant (p. 24).

An inscription indicates that only a "maiden knight" (suggesting a Galahad figure: a pure soul, a virgin, p. 27) can free the captives. Enter Chinon, who arrives and engages in a long battle with the monster, but the latter suddenly disappears, and the stone simply rolls away from the cave entrance. The next arrival is a group of fairies whose king explains that he took the form of the monster to test Chinon's prowess. He also identifies himself: he is Oboram, obviously the character earlier known as Oberon. The latter is a familiar figure in both epic and Arthurian romance, and his presence here moves the narrative, albeit only slightly, closer to traditional Arthuriana. That movement accelerates when Oboram, whose role here recalls (if only distantly) that of Merlin in earlier Arthurian tradition, shows Chinon and his companions an enchanted sword in a stone, and only Chinon, assuming an almost risible figuration of Arthur himself, is able to draw it. Oboram rewards him with rich arms and armor, as well as with a dwarf who will serve as his very own page.

Chinon resolves to rescue Celestina, and he is accompanied by Triamore in the guise of an enchantress – a striking instance of cross-dressing. He – now "she" – agrees to meet the sultan in the forest, and there Lancelot and the others, who are lying in wait, capture the sultan and kill all in his entourage. Chinon's role in this sequence, as in a good many others, is minimal once the battle with the monster is decided. The knights then return to England, where Arthur praises Chinon highly, knights him, and inducts him into the Round Table fellowship.

To this point the author has introduced a great many remarkable and sometimes outlandish motifs. First, there is the instantaneous transformation of Chinon into an aspiring and eager knight-to-be. Second, there is the fact that knights (and apprentices), instead of journeying to Arthur's court to seek adventures and fame, now leave England to seek them in France. In addition, Chinon apparently becomes famous and distinguished, worthy of the Round Table, by performing a single act of valor – the battle with Oboram – and even there he is successful, if the outcome can be termed a success, only because the monster disappears during the battle. His effort to rescue Celestina, however admirable, is aborted when Lancelot and Tristram accomplish the deed with little or no assistance from him. The notion of chivalry is thus reduced to the ability to succeed by whatever means, including ambush and accident. At the end of the sequence, we find ourselves on more familiar Arthurian ground, with the Sword in the Stone and the Round Table. But even the Sword in the Stone motif is presented without its traditional Arthurian significance: it is a task that only Chinon can accomplish, but instead of revealing destiny, it merely brings him material prizes of arms and armor.

In any event, Chinon's chivalric ascension (such as it is) and his acceptance as a Round Table knight provide a sense of closure. Or rather, there would be closure were it not that we have now reached roughly the mid-point in the narrative. And the magic continues. An additional love intrigue involves a young woman named Cassiopeia, the daughter of a counselor to the king of Egypt. The author's taste for exoticism now begins to lead us even farther away from recognizably Arthurian themes, apart from the continued use of a few familiar names. A man whose love for Cassiopeia is not reciprocated enlists the aid of a witch, who imprisons Cassiopeia in a large rock and transforms her father

into a bear, bearing a sign that offers great rewards to the person who kills him. Fairies transport Chinon to the rock, and he falls in love as abruptly as he had discovered a desire to become a knight. Soon the witch imprisons him as well, but three of Arthur's knights manage to free him by defeating a giant guarding his prison. Chinon and the three Arthurian knights force the witch to release Cassiopeia and to return the bear eventually to his human form (that is, her father). Eventually Chinon and Cassiopeia marry.

Surely that would constitute a traditional and satisfactory conclusion to the story. But again, that is not to be, for Middleton is still far from done. Even the details mentioned to this point hardly do justice to the romance, and to illustrate the diversity and the seeking after exotic and extravagant adventure, we might consider one further plot device among many to come. Cassiopeia has three brothers (Michander, Terpander, and Theonas). The witch had required Cassiopeia to give each one a task or quest that ostensibly would free her from the rock, and the tasks will take the three to distant and exotic places. The first brother is to go to a mountain in Asia and bring back a vial of virgin's tears. (Perversely, one might wonder whether they – that is, either tears or virgins – may not be native to France or Britain.) The second brother is sent to Arabia to bring back a harp possessed by a cannibal and guarded by a monster that is half man and half dog. The third is to go to a distant island guarded by two harpies and bring back a golden book containing all enchantments.

All of these details, and others not mentioned here, put to rest any lingering doubt that the author's intent is to present the most extravagant tale possible[1]. This is a literary world in which love and some unchivalrous chivalry oppose magic but often fail to win, except in the very end. There are witches and monsters, fairies aplenty, Oboram, and (briefly) Merlin, whose advice is sought at one point. There is a serious effort to stir the audience's imagination, and there are multiple and entwined story lines, some of which exclude the eponymous hero. There is of course a hero, but, as suggested, it is not entirely obvious

1 Indeed, Helen Cooper, in a brief article titled "Lancelot's Wives", devotes a paragraph to *Chinon* and, in addition to emphasizing the excessive alliteration, suggests that Middleton "… seems to have had no motive beyond the desire to cash in (in the most literal sense) on his hero's [Lancelot's] name"; see *Arthuriana*, 16, 2, 2006, p. 59-62, at p. 61.

that it is Chinon (except that his name is attached to the text). Lancelot is decidedly more central to the plot. And of course, like many of his contemporaries, Middleton takes liberties with traditional characters and the relationships among them. Those liberties, such as the love of Lancelot for an unmarried woman named Laura rather than Guenevere, demonstrate that this is either determinedly revisionist fiction or, perhaps, fiction that simply uses, for popular appeal, a few Arthurian motifs without concern for established convention.

Should we wish to catalogue the motifs that the romance does retain from traditional Arthurian legend, the Sword in the Stone episode comes immediately to mind. Chinon's merit is ostensibly indicated by his success in this trial, which might imply a moral or chivalric equivalence of Chinon and Arthur. But the parallel is deceptive, since Chinon himself has thus far accomplished little or nothing and because he will owe most of his successes, past and future, to other knights, to fairies, or to accident. Both the contents and the tone of the romance, if simply described as has been done here, might lead readers to suspect an element of parody in the Sword in the Stone episode. But it can be parody, if at all, in no more than a narrowly technical sense. It is difficult if not impossible to attribute parodic intent to Middleton, in large part owing to the quite obvious limits to his talent as well as to his twin apparent interests: to excel in alliteration and to regale his contemporaries by elaborating a sequence of highly exotic and fantastic episodes.

Helen Cooper offers a tantalizing suggestion about romances of the 1590s, including *Chinon*. Referring to them, correctly, as "mass-market pot-boilers", she suggests that they were driven out of "high cultural visibility" by satire. She adds that they "… seem poised to invite very different reactions from sophisticated and from less-educated readers"[1]. Presumably the former group grasped the satirical spirit of these works, whereas the "less-educated" simply enjoyed the string of rollicking adventures, piled one upon the other. The response to these works may indeed divide into two – or, more likely, many – categories, though it may be objected that the term "satire" implies a level of authorial design and skill not easily attributable to Middleton. To offer an extreme and no doubt unfair comparison, Middleton was no Cervantes, who was writing less than a decade later.

1 Cooper, *English Romance in Time*, p. 39.

But the romance, if it is characterized neither by parody nor by satire, must surely strike us as ironic, given the successes and ascension of Chinon in the near-absence of any notable accomplishments by him. Until near the close of the text, he manages to make a name and an enviable reputation for himself largely because that name is closely associated with those of Lancelot, Tristram, and Triamore. And even those knights are severed from their more familiar contexts. There is neither a Guenevere nor an Iseut, and the prominence of Triamore remains unexplained. Middleton uses fragments of tradition and discards everything – including eventually the figure of Arthur himself – for which he sees no further need.

And he is not alone in his treatment of Arthurian sources in England at the close of the sixteenth century. As an example of freedom from Arthurian tradition at the time, we might consider Richard Johnson's 1599 *Tom a Lincolne*, somewhat better known (if not necessarily much better) than *Chinon*. In that work, to mention only a few details, Tom is the son of King Arthur and Angelica, to whom the king is not married. (Obviously, by now the traditional pairing of characters is not obligatory, perhaps not even expected, as witness Lancelot and Laura in *Chinon* and Arthur and Angelica here.) In Richard Johnson's work, Tom, Lancelot, and others are shipwrecked on "Fairy Land", an island inhabited only by women. The men's four-month stay ensures that the island will not soon be depopulated. After numerous adventures, Tom's illegitimate birth is revealed, and the jealous queen kills Angelica (Tom's mother) and then, tortured by remorse, hangs herself. And there is much, much more to this work, but further summary is unnecessary. It might be noted though that Richard S. M. Hirsch, who edited *Tom a Lincolne*, suggested that one of Johnson's sources (or his inspiration) may well have been *Chinon*.

Middleton's romance is not only heavily alliterative, but also full of fairies, fierce fighting, and far-fetched farces and fun – the alliteration is contagious – as well as curious and often comical coincidences, multiple monsters, marvels, and magic. In reality, *Chinon* represents an effort to regale the audience with a combination of the strangest adventures possible, in a story spiced with just a bit of recognizable Arthuriana.

Despite the impressive multiplication of episodes in this romance, its structure is relatively linear and uncomplicated. Specifically, there

is a very rudimentary triadic structure, with three women and the triple love intrigues, a structure reflected in other elements (e.g., the three brothers) grouped in threes. But even that simple observation comes close to straining after a narrative plan that is not there. The fact remains that Chinon's sudden conversion to chivalry, the fantastic adventures, and the elaborate exoticism (of, for example, the sultan of Babylon, the king of Egypt, or a vial of virgin's tears from an Asian mountain) all imply inventiveness and, at least for modern readers, an almost slavish attention to style, but a limited talent for composition and a decidedly casual approach to the rich Arthurian tradition from which he barely drew.

All of that raises a question: is this romance worth our time (and an article)? Perhaps so, if it is read as an illustration, and a quite extreme one at that, of the period's tastes and approaches. As an artist, Middleton was middling at best, though endowed with an extremely rich imagination. Obviously willing to cater to popular tastes, he has concocted some astonishing adventures, extensive and strange enough almost to obscure the Arthurian element of the tale. We might suggest more accurately that this work is at best marginally Arthurian, and Arthur himself is barely a discernible presence in the romance. But that situation may in fact be the best justification for our attention to the romance. That is, the Arthurian sphere may, by the end of the sixteenth century in England and undoubtedly elsewhere, be little more than a convenient "hook" on which an author can hang sequences of adventures of all sorts, confident in the knowledge that his readers will recognize, and respond to, the venerable Arthurian context. And once the reader is hooked, as it were, the author can de-emphasize or even discard the Arthurian elements and continue on his fictional way. Thus the Arthurian themes serve primarily as a convenient literary "shorthand" to indicate that remarkable chivalric exploits are in store for the reader. But the adventures are unlike those found in the majority of earlier Arthurian romances; they more closely resemble the oddities found in imaginative travel narratives of the late Middle Ages and beyond.

There is another very good reason to study texts that are not among recognized masterpieces. Sometimes we discover features that lead to a revision of conventional judgments. That has happened repeatedly

in recent decades[1], and even if that does not occur, as it does not here, the examination of such works can help us better understand attitudes, literary methods, and the connection of a text to its cultural and social context. We clearly cannot argue that *Chinon* is a neglected masterpiece – neglected yes, but by no means a masterpiece. Yet it is in its own way fascinating, precisely for its excesses and flaws. It is moreover a striking illustration of the role played by Arthurian themes at the end of the sixteenth century, specifically (in this instance) in early English literature. Concerning *Chinon of England*, we may ultimately concur with what its editor, William Mead, wrote about *Tom a Lincolne* (p. xxxvii): "it is measurably readable, if one's mood is not too exigent."

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1 A dramatic example is offered by the reception of the fifteenth-century *Erec* and *Cligés*. Even Wendelin Foerster, the first scholar to publish them (in the late nineteenth century), dismissed them as tasteless mutilations of Chrétien's work. They were almost entirely neglected until two doctoral dissertations concerning them were completed in the 1970s, after which little was made of them for the following two decades. Beginning in the 1990s, a number of important articles appeared, both romances were properly edited, and they were published in English translation. M. Colombo Timelli, the editor of the fifteenth-century texts, published some fifteen articles on them, and roughly the same number of articles were devoted to them by ten other scholars. For further details and full bibliographical information on all these, see the introduction to J. T. Grimbert and C. J. Chase, trans., *Chrétien de Troyes in Prose: The Burgundian Erec and Cligés*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2011, p. 11-15 and bibliography p. 149-154. A look through Arthurian bibliographies will attest to the significantly greater attention given in recent years to romances such as *Le Chevalier du papegau*, formerly neglected or largely dismissed as a trifle, on which see J. H. M. Taylor, "The Knight and the Parrot: Writing the Quest in Late Arthurian Romance", *The Fortunes of King Arthur*, ed. N. J. Lacy, Arthurian Studies 64, Woodbridge Suffolk and Rochester NY, Boydell and Brewer, 2005, p. 181-194.