Morris and Old French

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This article considers the little known group of translations from Old French that Morris produced in the early 1890s, and discusses their relationship to Morris’s other writings of the time.¹ The main texts are the four stories originally published in three separate volumes at the Kelmscott Press in 1893 and 1894, The Tale of King Florus and the Fair Jehane, Of the Friendship of Amis and Amile and The Tale of the Emperor Cousans and of Over Sea. They were later collected into the single volume, Old French Romances Done into English by William Morris, published by George Allen in 1896 with an enthusiastic Introduction by Joseph Jacobs, in which form we are likely to encounter them today — if at all. But Morris’s reviving interest in Old French literature had found expression earlier in an even less known text, the poem L’Ordene de Chevalerie which he translated as The Ordination of Knighthood. The poem and translation were published in April 1893 at the Kelmscott Press, together with the translation by Caxton of another medieval French text, by Ramon Lull, called by Caxton The Order of Chivalry. The relationship between the two medieval French works is of great scholarly interest, as is their bringing together in a single Kelmscott volume; the idea probably came from the editor of the two texts, F. S. Ellis, who, according to Mackail, produced a prose translation of L’Ordene intended for publication. Mackail then goes on: ‘But Morris one day suddenly remembered the fact that the Press, like the firm of thirty years back, “kept a poet of its own”, and turned him on for the purpose’.² So I will begin by looking briefly at this little known poem before going on to the four stories.

The Ordination of Knighthood ³ follows its source poem in using octosyllabic couplets to tell a story about the great warrior Saladin and a prisoner that he takes, Hugh of Tabary, a Knight of Galilee. Prince Hugh is taken before Saladin — ‘Who greeted him in his Latin / For well he knew it certainly’ (p. 354) — and is told that he can be ransomed for a large sum. He can go home to raise it if he will give his oath to return in two years. However, when Hugh asks ‘a leave-to-go’, Saladin first asks him to explain ‘In what wise one is made a Knight’ (p. 355). Hugh warns him that without Christian faith and baptism no one can properly receive knighthood, and that he would be blamed for conferring it. But Saladin then makes an offer that Hugh is unable to refuse: ‘For in my prison dost thou go / And needs must do the thing I will / Howso to thee it seemeth ill’ (p. 355). Hugh then takes the appreciative Saladin in detail through all the stages of ordination, giving careful explanations of each as it comes. One stage involves the sword indicating ‘right and loyalty’, clearly appealing to Hugh (and Morris):

‘Which is to say it seemeth me,
To guard the poor folk of the land
Against the rich man’s heavy hand,
And feeble people to uphold

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'Gainst shaming of the strong and bold; 
This then is Mercy's work to win.' (p. 359)

Hugh cannot complete the ordination of a non-Christian, but he does offer instruction on some further points. After this, the process is complete as far as it can be under the strange circumstances.

Now Saladin, pleased with Hugh, takes him into his 'feast-hall fair', and offers various gifts to his 'valiant' captive (pp. 361-62). He even tells his nobles to pay Hugh's ransom; they obediently pledge the ransom – and a substantial sum besides (p. 362). So they feast for a further eight days, and then Hugh and his ten fellows leave 'Paynemrie', escorted by a large and friendly band of Saladin's people (p. 363). Hugh and his fellows return to Galilee. He is still upset that his other companions have had to be left behind, but fairly distributes the wealth that had been given to him. The audience/reader is then told that the tale will be unprofitable to the wicked, but morally profitable to the good (p. 364). The emphasis falls on the value and importance of Knighthood in its association with Christianity; the knight is entitled to bear arms in church at mass, 'That missay may no evil one / The worship of the Mary-Son' (p. 365). And if the knight upholds his Order, he will 'wend straight to Paradise' (p. 366). The knight must be respected above all except the priest. The tale has been told so that we can see from it that 'Of good deed ever good end is'. The poem concludes in a conventionally religious way: 'Now each and all, amen we say' (p. 366). Morris's version, in its vigour and clarity, does full justice to its source.

Morris moved rapidly on from the poem to the translation of the prose tales. By 31 January 1893 he was writing, presumably to Ellis, about them:

There is a little book of the Librarie Elzevirienne hight Contes et Nouvelles de la XIIIme Siecle: two of these are amongst the most beautiful works of the Middle Ages, and I intend translating them, and printing in a nice little book in Chaucer type. Probably I shall design some two-coloured letters for it.4

Mackail makes the observation that this 'little book published in 1856, had for thirty years been one of the treasures of literature for him. Together with the "Violier des Histoires Romaines", which appeared in the same series two years later, it had been among the first sources of his knowledge of the French romance of the Middle Ages'.5 Mackail then draws attention to a letter from Swinburne thanking Morris for sending him a copy of the last of the Kelmscott Press volumes, in which Swinburne recalled their shared pleasure in reading the French stories "in the days when we first foregathered at Oxford" nearly forty years before'.6 Mackail also notes that from his reading of the Nouvelles Morris had planned two of the stories for The Earthly Paradise, the completed tale 'The Man Born to be King' being based on 'Le Conte de L'Empereur Coustant', and the unfinished poem 'Amis and Amillion' which had its origin in 'L'Amitie d'Amis et d'Amile'.7

Old French Romances opens with the shortest and most straightforward of the four stories, 'The Tale of King Coustans the Emperor'.8 The pagan Emperor of Byzantium, Musselin, speaks unrecognised to a Christian whose wife has just
borne a child, and is told that astrological evidence shows that the child, a son, will one day marry the Emperor's daughter, and he himself will 'be emperor withal, and lord of this city, and of all the earth' (p. 6). The Emperor, angered, orders his knight to steal the child. He then 'did do slit the belly of him with a knife from the breast down to the navel, and said withal to the Knight, that never should the son of that churl have to wife his daughter, nor be emperor after him' (p. 6). That only shows that he does not know what kind of story he is in, and the rest of the narrative, as an experienced reader would expect, is the fulfilment of the Christian's prophecy. The Knight who has to dispose of the body, after persuading the Emperor not to pluck out the heart, feels pity, and leaves it near a monastery. Here the Abbot is also compassionate, and sends for leeches to heal the wound. He then baptises the child, naming him Constans 'because him seemed that he cost exceeding much for the healing of him' (p. 8). The narrative then moves on fifteen years, by which time Constans is a handsome and accomplished lad, and a favourite of the Abbot, who takes him with him to court. When the Emperor is told his story, he realises who he is, and demands him from the Abbot. Having got the boy into his service, he wants to arrange for him to die 'in such wise that none might wot word thereof' (p. 14). He therefore writes a letter for the unsuspecting Constans to take to the Burgreve of Byzantium, in which the Burgreve is instructed to kill the bearer of the letter. However, when the young man arrives in the city, he finds his way into a beautiful garden where he falls asleep. Enter 'the fair daughter of the Emperor' and three of her maidens, to play (p. 15). They find Constans sleeping under a tree, 'all vermil as the rose' (p. 16), and the daughter is delighted by him. She reads the letter, and is distressed, but rapidly comes up with a neat plan. She substitutes for the fatal letter one in which the Burgreve is instructed to give the bearer of the letter 'my fair daughter in marriage according to our law' (p. 18). The Burgreve does as he is told; the wedding takes place and is celebrated for fifteen days, during which 'folk did no work in the city, save eating and drinking and making merry' (p. 21). The Emperor now thinks that enough time has passed for his command to have been carried out, and sets off for Byzantium. On the way he meets a messenger and is told of his daughter's wedding, and that she may well be pregnant 'because it is three weeks since he hath wedded her' (p. 23). The Emperor's response to this news, given in very the next sentence, is surprisingly acceptant: 'Forsooth', said the Emperor, 'in a good hour be it! for since it is so, it behoveth me to abide it, since no other it may be' (p. 23). He then rides on to Byzantium, and all is well. The positive quality of the conclusion is enhanced by the fact that when the pagan Emperor dies and Constans succeeds him, he takes the Abbot as his advisor, and 'did do christen his wife, and all they of that land were converted to the law of Jesus Christ' (p. 24). Constans 'begot on his wife an heir male', who becomes the 'prudhomme much great', Constantine. 'And thereafter was the city called Constantinople, because of his father, Constans, who costed so much, but aforetime it was called Byzance' (p. 25). Thus Christian Providence works itself out to the good of all, in the most simply positive of the group of stories.

The next story, The Friendship of Amis and Amile, particularly impressed Walter Pater, who discussed it sympathetically in the first chapter of The Renaissance in 1873. It begins with the birth of two well-born boys, who are
taken to Rome by their fathers for baptism by the Pope, and become lifelong friends. After Amis’s marriage, he goes to court with Amile. Before returning to his wife, he warns his friend: ‘But keep thee from touching the daughter of the King; and above all things beware of Arderi the felon’ (p. 38). Amile ignores this good advice, though the narrator points out that men often act unwisely in these affairs: ‘Yet is not this adventure strange, whereas he was no holier than David, nor wiser than Solomon’ (p. 38). Amile is then betrayed to the king, and Amile formally challenges his betrayer. He then goes in search of Amis, who agrees to help him, and goes to court to take up the challenge in his place. The king says that if he – Amis/Amile – is victorious, ‘I will give thee to wife Belisant my daughter’ (p. 43). Amis kills Alveri, and receives Belisant as his reward; she is then handed on to Amile, who returns with her to the court.

Later, Amis ‘became mesel’ [i.e. stricken with leprosy], and his wife Obias ‘had him in sore hate, and many a time strove to strangle him’ (p. 45). Eventually, Amis asks his companions to take him to Amile, and he is recognised and taken into the house despite his leprosy (p. 48). It is then revealed by an angel that he can be healed only by the blood of Amile’s infant children. After much heart-searching, Amile ‘cut off their heads, and then laid them out behind the bed, and laid the heads to the bodies, and covered them over even as they slept’ (p. 52). It is interesting to note that this part of the story is quoted at length by Pater. Amile then washes Amis in the blood and prays for his recovery, which occurs at once. The two men then ‘gave thanks to our Lord with great joy’ (p. 53) and go to church, where ‘the bells by the grace of God rang of themselves’ (p. 53). God also ensures that, when Amile goes to his children, expecting to weep over them, ‘he found them playing in the bed; but the scars of their wounds showed about the necks of each of them even as a red fillet’ (p. 54). So all is well, and Amis’s lot is made all the better by the sudden death of his unwifely wife, borne off by devils: ‘they brake the neck of her, and bore away her soul’ (p. 55). Amis becomes a good servant of the Lord.

Finally, the Pope asks the help of the King of France, against the King of the Lombards, ‘who much tormented the Church’ (p. 55). Amis and Amile serve together in this successful campaign. They are model knights, and when they are both killed, the King establishes two churches in remembrance of the battle, one dedicated to St Eusebius, where Amis is buried, and one to St Peter, where Amile is buried. However, ‘on the morrow’s morn, the body of Amile, and his coffin therewith, was found in the Church of St Eusebius hard by the coffin of Amis his fellow’ (p. 60). This is acknowledged as a miracle, and the priests of the church of St Eusebius are told that ‘they should without ceasing guard and keep the bodies of those two fellows, AMIS and AMILE . . .’ (p. 61). Thus ends ‘this marvellous fellowship which might not be sundered by death’ (p. 60). We can assume that the fellowship is what would have appealed to Morris about this story, rather than the Christian emphasis of the original, which he nevertheless fairly translates.

The other two stories are longer, but may be summarised more briefly. The Tale of King Florus and the Fair Jehane is interestingly constructed, alternating its two main foci, King Florus on the one hand, and Jehane on the other. King Florus’s story is the simpler. He is married twice, but neither wife bears him an heir. He is thus still wanting a suitable wife towards the end of the tale, when his
story unites with that of Jehane, to whom most of the narrative is devoted. Jehane's more complicated story involves marriage to a humble squire, Robin; a bet on the virtue of his wife with the villainous Raoul who, although valiantly resisted by the lady, has noticed 'a black spot which she [Jehane] had on her right groin hard by her natural part' (p. 81), and when he reports this to Robin, he—rather supinely, to the modern reader—decides that he has lost the bet, pays up, and sets off for Paris. The more robust Jehane responds by herself setting off for Paris to seek her husband, with her hair cut short, 'arrayed like to an esquire' (p. 84), and calling herself John. They meet up on the way, and Jehane/John becomes Robin's squire, and goes with him to Marseilles. Here they have to sell their horses, but the ever-resourceful Jehane announces that she can make French bread, and she does this so successfully that soon they can buy 'a very great house' and set themselves up to run it, successfully, as a hostel (p. 95). As fate will have it in such stories, the penitent Raoul arrives in Marseilles, and stays at the very house; Jehane hears his story, but holds her peace. Robin and 'John' continue to prosper, and finally decide to return home, where Sir Robin challenges Sir Raoul and defeats him. Now it is time for Jehane to reveal herself as a woman—indeed, according to her female cousin, 'the fairest lady of the world' (p. 108). Sir Robin and Jehane live happily together for ten years, though childless; then Sir Robin dies 'like a valiant man' (p. 115), leaving Jehane as a beautiful and philanthropic widow.

The final part of the story brings together its two protagonists. King Florus sends one of his knights to ask for her hand. Jehane replies spiritedly: 'But say to thy king, that, so please him, he come to me, if he prize me so much and loveth me, and it seems good to him that I take him to husband and spouse, for the lords ought to beseech the ladies, and not ladies the lords' (p. 119). The knight, somewhat surprised, takes the message back, and King Florus agrees. They are soon married, and 'King Florus loved her much for her great beauty, and for the great wit and great valiancy that was in her’ (p. 122). She bears a son, Florence, who becomes Emperor of Constantinople, and a daughter, Floria, who becomes queen of her own country on the death of her father and also marries the King of Hungary. The two virtuous beings are thus rewarded by God according to their deserts, and die peacefully and in fulfilment, as Morris likes his heroes and heroines to die.

The fourth story, 'The History of Over Sea', is also complicated. It contains an extraordinary scene when Thibault, who is married but childless, decides to go as a pilgrim to the shrine of St Jakem/Jaque; his unnamed wife insists on accompanying him. On their way, the two are set upon by eight 'strong-thieves'. Thibault kills three of them, but is overcome by the others, tied up, and 'cast ... into a bramble-bush much sharp and much rough' (p. 136). The five remaining robbers then rape the lady, and leave her with her husband, who has seen what has happened but feels no ill will towards his wife as he knows that she was forced. He calls to her to unbind him and get him out of the brambles. But she picks up a sword and 'went toward her lord, full of great ire and evil will of that which was befallen' (p. 137), fearing that one day her husband will reproach her. She seems to want to kill him, but the blow of the sword shears the bonds, and he escapes, saying: 'Dame, so please God, no more today shalt thou slay me'. She
replies: ‘Of a surety, sir, I am heavy thereof’. (p. 138). After this extraordinary event, they escape from the forest and rejoin their retinue. Thibault continues to give honour to his lady, ‘save the lying a-bed with her’ (p. 140).

But the train of events here started will obviously have its consequences. The lady’s father finds out what has happened, and tries to punish her. But Providence prevents this, and after a series of exciting adventures which take them to the land of the Saracens, where the lady actually marries the generous young Soldan and has two children by him, the Europeans return to Europe together. In Rome the Pope baptises the Sultan’s son as William, receives the lady back into the Christian church, and confirms her marriage to Thibault. They can then return happily to their native place. The Count’s son becomes a knight, worthy of the rank: ‘Much he loved the worthies, and fair gifts he gave to poor knights and poor gentle dames of the country, and much was prized and loved of poor and rich’ (pp. 175-76). The story ends positively with two marriages. William marries the daughter of Raoul de Preaux, while his sister marries Malakin of Baudas, a valiant servant of the Soudan. She, like her mother earlier in the story, is given a choice in the matter; her father says to Malakin: ‘I will give her to thee with a good will, if she will grant it’, to which Malakin replies: ‘Sir ... against her will would I do nothing’ (p. 179). She becomes the grandmother of ‘the courteous Turk Salahadin, who was so worthy and wise and conquering’ (p. 180). Thus we are brought back to the figure so prominent in *The Ordination of Knighthood*, and so admired in medieval Christendom.

We can certainly see these translations as part of the attention to medieval texts that marks the whole of Morris’s undertaking at the Kelmscott Press. And we may well see a psychological link implied in the letter of Swinburne quoted by Mackail, in which Swinburne wrote of their shared pleasure in reading the French stories at Oxford nearly forty years before. According to Price’s diary Morris first met Swinburne at the beginning of November 1857.18 Neither Mackail nor, as far as I know, any other biographer, has referred to this shared interest with Swinburne in French romance at Oxford, but Mackail does write of ‘a rapid and prodigious assimilation of medieval chronicles and romances’ 10 at this time. Morris, approaching the age of sixty, was evidently revisiting some of the texts and friendships of his Oxford days as he planned the publications for his Press.

Finally, we may usefully put the translations into the context of Morris’s other writings of the earlier part of the decade. Having finished *The Story of the Glittering Plain* as well as *News from Nowhere* in 1890, Morris seems next to have started on *The Well at the World’s End*, possibly completed by December 1892 though perhaps revised in 1893, and then *The Wood beyond the World*, started around November 1893 and printed by May 1894, though not published until October of that year. *The Wood* is therefore the book written closest in time to the translations. I do not want to suggest any very direct links, but rather to suggest that Morris found in the French romances significant encouragement in his practice of a deeply unfashionable literary mode. At the same time, it is evident that his own romances avoid at least two elements to be found in the French works, the miraculous and the religious. However much he was attracted to the romance form, Morris consistently gave it a humanist dimension quite distinct from the medieval mode.11 We therefore find in his romances no equivalents to the
Emperor slitting open the infant Coustans ‘from the breast down to the navel’ (p. 6), or to the bathing of Amile in the blood of the children of Amis, and their – and his – miraculous recovery. More striking, though, since the religious impulse is pervasive in all four French stories, is its absence from Morris’s romances. The occasional pieces of religious language that occur in them are invariably conventional, with none of the conviction of the thirteenth century.

As to positive features of the French stories – and perhaps of the poem too – that we can think of as having appealed to Morris, the most obvious, as already suggested, is the freedom of possibilities within these created worlds, in which the restrictive remit of realism does not run. Perhaps there are other elements too. In ‘Coustans’ he could find an affirmation of the power of love – surely more significant to Morris than that of the stars; in ‘Amis and Amile’ an appealing celebration of male friendship; in ‘King Florus’ the rewarding of love and courage; and in ‘Over Sea’ that of resilience and repentance: all positive endings, rather than the grim ones met with in the realistic fiction of the 1890s. Maybe too Morris responded, as he does elsewhere, to the forcefulness of the female characters, quite prepared to take responsibility for their own lives even in societies in which their roles were clearly limited. These qualities permeate Morris’s later romances, and help to give them their positive force. Although Morris could not share the Christian faith of the Middle Ages, he could find in its literature, as in its architecture, an affirmation of human possibilities that he took as his responsibility to carry through from the past into the future.

NOTES
1 This is a version of a lecture given at the conference organised by the William Morris Society of Canada in July 2000.
3 The Ordination of Knighthood was appropriately placed by May Morris in Volume XVII of The Collected Works of William Morris (Longmans, Green and Co., 1913), with The Wood Beyond the World, Child Christopher, and the Old French Romances. It occupies pp. 353-66; page references to this text are given in brackets after quotations.
5 Mackail, II, p. 297.
thanked Morris for the gift of ‘your beautiful little book’ – *King Florus and the Fair Jehane* – with the comment: ‘There never was such a type as yours – one could read Longfellow or Tupper in such type’ (ibid. p. 63).

7 Mackail, II, p. 298.
8 Quotations from all four stories are taken from *Old French Romances Done into English by William Morris* (London: George Allen and Co., 1896; 1914 edition). Page numbers are given in brackets after quotations.
9 Mackail, I, p. 131.
10 Mackail, I, p. 41.
11 See the interesting recent discussion of Morris's heroes by Richard Mathews in *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), especially Ch. 4, ‘Plotting the Modern Mythic Hero: Morris and Tolkein’. Drawing on Northrop Frye's terminology, Mathews contrasts the 'horizontal' heroes of Morris, concerned with their social responsibility, with the 'vertical' heroes of Tolkein, concerned with transcendental values.