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ENGLISH LITERATURE
MEDIEVAL

By W. P. KER, M.A.

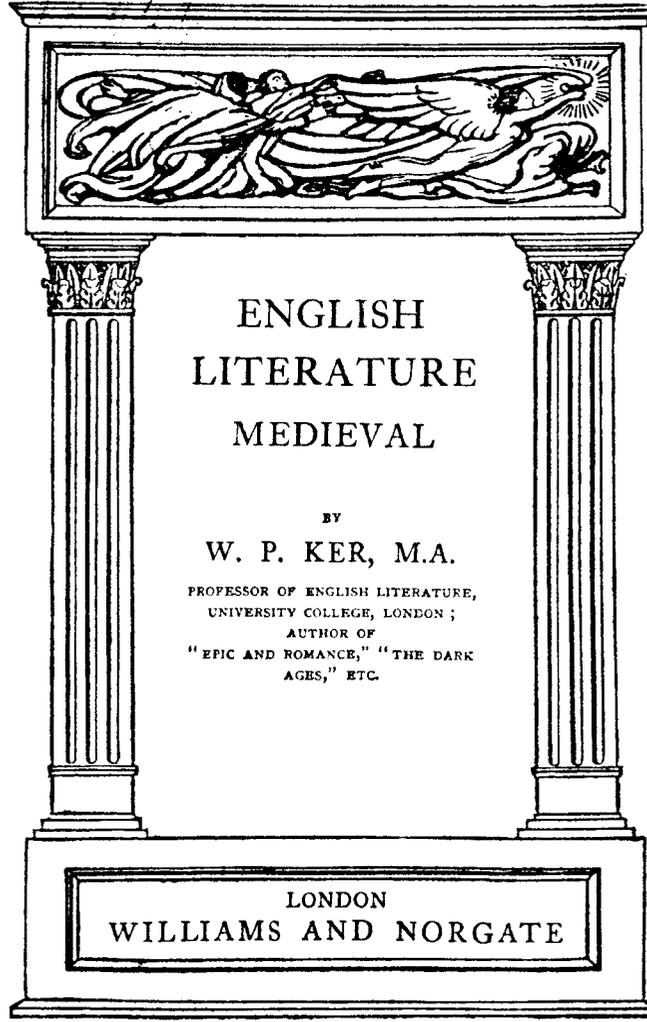
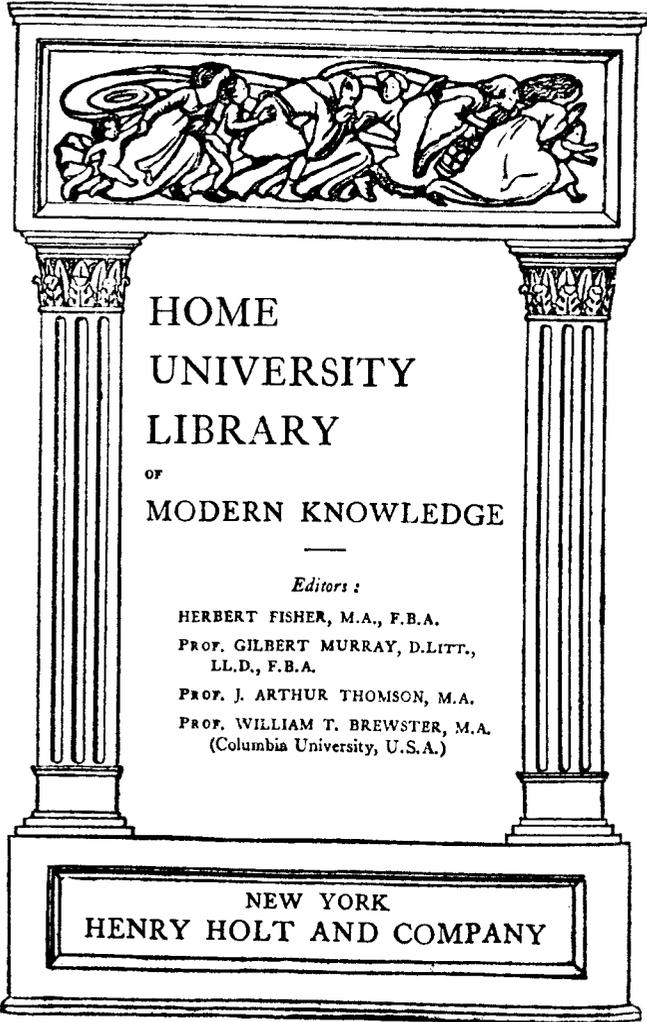
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ENGLISH LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

READERS are drawn to medieval literature in many different ways, and it is hardly possible to describe all the attractions and all the approaches by which they enter on this ground. Students of history have to learn the languages of the nations with whose history they are concerned, and to read the chief books in those languages, if they wish to understand rightly the ideas, purposes and temper of the past ages. Sometimes the study of early literature has been instigated by religious or controversial motives, as when the Anglo-Saxon homilies were taken up and edited and interpreted in support of the Reformation. Sometimes it is mere curiosity that leads to investigation of old literature—a wish to find out the meaning of what looks at

first difficult and mysterious. Curiosity of this sort, however, is seldom found unmixed; there are generally all sorts of vague associations and interests combining to lead the explorer on. It has often been observed that a love of Gothic architecture, or of medieval art in general, goes along with, and helps, the study of medieval poetry. Chatterton's old English reading and his imitations of old English verse were inspired by the Church of St. Mary Redcliffe at Bristol. The lives of Horace Walpole, of Thomas Warton, of Sir Walter Scott, and many others show how medieval literary studies may be nourished along with other kindred antiquarian tastes.

Sometimes, instead of beginning in historical or antiquarian interests, or in a liking for the fashions and art of the Middle Ages in general, it happens that a love of medieval literature has its rise in one particular author, e. g. Dante or Sir Thomas Malory. The book, the *Divina Commedia* or *Le Morte d'Arthur*, is taken up, it may be, casually, with no very distinct idea or purpose, and then it is found to be engrossing and captivating—what is often rightly called “a revelation of a new world.” For a long time this is enough in itself; the reader is content with Dante or

with the *Morte d'Arthur*. But it may occur to him to ask about “the French book” from which Malory got his adventures of the Knights of King Arthur; he may want to know how the legend of the Grail came to be mixed up with the romances of the Round Table; and so he will be drawn on, trying to find out as much as possible and plunging deeper and deeper into the Middle Ages. The same kind of thing happens to the reader of Dante; Dante is found all through his poem acknowledging obligations to earlier writers; he is not alone or independent in his thought and his poetry; and so it becomes an interesting thing to go further back and to know something about the older poets and moralists, and the earlier medieval world in general, before it was all summed up and recorded in the imagination of the *Divine Comedy*. Examples of this way of reading may be found in the works of Ruskin and in Matthew Arnold. Matthew Arnold, rather late in his life (in the introductory essay to Mr. T. H. Ward's *English Poets*), shows that he has been reading some old French authors. He does not begin with old French when he is young; evidently he was brought to it in working back from the better known poets, Dante and