

OLD FRENCH ROMANCES

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Under the title *Old French Romances* (Scribners), Mr. William Morris has reissued for the general public his versions of four mediæval French tales, already printed for the æsthetic few at the Kelmscott Press. The new edition contains also a brief but valuable introduction by Mr. Joseph Jacobs,¹—of which we need say only that it displays its author's customary erudition in matters of this kind, not to mention his gay and at times even jovial manner. The stories chosen by Mr. Morris are four of the five in the little volume 'Nouvelles françaises en prose du 13ième siècle,' published as long ago as 1856 by MM. Moland and d'Héricault (the fifth tale in that collection being the delightful *chante-fable* of 'Aucassin et Nicolette,' which Mr. Andrew Lang has done into English, as everybody knows). The present volume contains, then, the stories of 'L'Empereur Constant,' 'Ami et Amile,' 'Le Roi Flore et la belle Jehane,' and 'La Comtesse de Ponthieu' (or, as Mr. Morris prefers, 'Istore d'Outre-Mer'). In the case of the first two of these, readers of Old French will regret that the translations should be based upon the decidedly inferior prose forms of the tales rather than on the earlier and more poetical narratives in verse which are preserved to us. The last two exist in French only in prose, and we must perforce be satisfied with them as they are. All four stories are, however, in any form engaging and delightful. The first, 'L'Empereur Constant,' Mr. Morris has already retold (with some variations derived from other forms of the legend) in the *Earthly Paradise*, as 'The Man Born to be King.' The second, 'Ami et Amile,' is the most famous mediæval representative of stories about perfect friendship, like that of David and Jonathan or of

¹ Joseph Jacobs (1854-1916) was a folklorist, literary editor and Jewish historian.

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

Orestes and Pylades. The third, 'Le Roi Flore et la belle Jehane,' gives us one of the mediæval forms of the Cymbeline story of a wager about a wife's virtue. The last, 'La Comtesse de Ponthieu,' describes a strange and pathetic adventure extrinsically connected with the Crusades. It is probable that all the tales were originally Byzantine or Oriental.

It is perhaps not a matter of consequence whether Mr. Morris's version is philologically sound or not (it really is not very bad from this point of view), for he does not profess to be a philologist. The question of the character of the English style he has adopted has, on the other hand, some interest. A German has already written a dissertation on the sources of the *Earthly Paradise*; perhaps we may later get one on the sources of Mr. Morris's Romantic grammar. We should like to know, for example, how he came to be so fond of the ugly word 'much' used as an intensive ('a *much* valiant man,' 'a *much* good dame,' p. 119). His conjugation strikes us at times as having a curious similarity to that of the American negro ('And the Emperor Constans . . . did do christen his wife,' p. 23; 'The Emperor did do slit the belly of him with a knife from the breast down to the navel,' p. 6). We are somewhat at a loss to translate into the vernacular such locutions as 'much long aloof thence' (p. 13); and though the statement that the young Constans 'entered into the garden all a horseback' (p. 14) seems to reproduce the French *si entra ou gardin tout à cheval*, it can hardly be called a current English equivalent of it. But no doubt the style adopted by Mr. Morris, both here and in his translations of the Northern Saga, is intended to be caviare to the general. One thing is sure, that the style of the Old French narrators stood in no such relation to the common speech of mediæval France as Mr. Morris's to our tongue. And if translation be reproducing as nearly as possible the manner and tone, as well as the matter, of the original, this is not translation at all.