THE CHOICE OF THE MANUSCRIPT OF THE "MASTER OF GAME"

HE question which of the existing nineteen MSS. to select for reproduction in this place was one not lightly decided. A careful study of all the known and available existing complete copies narrowed down the choice to three MSS., two of which are in the British Museum, the third in the Bodleian Library. After consulting various authorities, I abandoned the idea of taking the latter MS., and the choice remained between the Vespasian B XII. and Additional MS. 16,165. For some time I entertained the idea of using the latter, for one reason, because this MS. is the only one containing the all-important passage settling for good and all the authorship of this English classic, and also because such a good authority as the late Sir Henry Ellis had selected this MS. when asked to give his opinion which of the various MSS. of the Master of Game was the best suited for reproduction by the Camden Society. His advice, though never carried out, for the work has remained unpublished, is embodied in a letter dated British Museum, April 4, 1855, which he wrote to Mr. W. J. Thoms. A copy of it was given me by the late Sir Henry Dryden, Bart., of whose kind assistance I shall have to speak repeatedly. The letter, which is worth quoting, runs:

"In compliance with the wish of our last Council of the Camden Society, I have looked carefully at the different MSS. which the British Museum possesses of the Master of the Game

"They are no fewer than ten¹ in number. In the Cottonian Library, one, Vesp. B XII., a beautiful and clear MS. on vellum, prefixed to which, in the same hand with the rest of the volume, is the English Giffard and Twety, filling a few pages as introductory of the treatise which follows.

"In the Royal Library in the Museum there are six copies of the *Master of the Game*; three on vellum, namely, 17 B XLI., 17 D IV., and 18 C XVIII.; and three on paper, 17 A LII., 2 17 B II., and 17 D XII.

"In the Harleian Collection there are two, both on paper: one, MS. Harl. 5086, with a different colophon from most of the MSS. already named—a sort of dedication; the other, Nr. 6824, a copy, I should say, shorter in its contents, and, in fact, of no great worth.

"There is another MS. on paper in our House, Additional 16,165, purchased for us as late as 1846. This MS. was written by, or for, John Shirley, an English poet of the fifteenth century, unknown to Ritson, although particularly mentioned by Tanner in his Bibliotheca Britannico-Hibernica.

"Of the MSS. I have mentioned I should myself make my choice, as an editor, between the Cottonian MS., Vespasian B XII. and the Shirley MS. Both are elegant specimens of the good writing of the period. But Vespasian B XII., though clear in appearance, will still be difficult in many passages to an amanuensis. There are some small figures of animals in the earlier part of the MS., but I doubt whether it would be at all needful to copy them in woodcuts. They belong moreover to Giffard and Twety, not to the Master

"After maturely considering the matter, however, I should put my final choice upon the "After maturely considering the matter, however, I should put my final choice upon the Shirley MS. It is on paper, clearly written in a strong, dark hand, and is the only MS. of the Master of the Game which distinctly states in its colophon-title that the treatise itself was written by the Duke of York who was killed at the battle of Agincourt. The MS. was written by the middle of the fifteenth century, completely corroborated by the itself is indisputably of the middle of the fifteenth century, completely corroborated by the title of a ballad written by Shirley contained in one of Thoresby's MSS. described in his Ducatus Leodiensis, dated in 1440.

"Of the rest of the MSS. I have mentioned, as in the Old Royal Library, several are of the fifteenth, one or two of the sixteenth, and one on paper written for and presented to Henry, Prince of Wales, the son of James I., at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

"The MSS. differ occasionally from each other, and some of them to a considerable extent from the other copies. I do not mean verbally, but in passages of length: particularly in one of square folio size, illuminated for and presented to King Edward IV., in the first page of which the King is presented the work, and the second page surrounded by a border of white and red roses.

"I mention these particulars with a view to impress the Council that if they undertake to print from any MS. of the Master of the Game, it must not be given to the world as the dry text of a treatise on hunting written in Old English in the reign of Henry V., but as a book compiled from the best foreign sources, intermixed with hunting knowledge and home practice of the sport as then pursued in England.

"The Duke of York makes particular reference to the book of *Phæbus*, the well-known treatise on hunting by Gaston, Count de Foix, afterwards printed at Paris by Verard, of whom the French historians say he had 1600 dogs, and who, Froissard says, 'loved hounds of all beasts winter and somer.'

"A bibliographical preface on the sport and treatises on hunting should certainly be prefixed to the book called the *Master of the Game*. There are other MSS. of the *Master of the Game* in other collections, I think, two in the Bodleian, and it is not unlikely that the catalogue of the MSS. of England would point out others.

"These should, at least in a general way, be looked at or inquired after. I am afraid I have made too long a letter of this, but it is only to explain what I think might be done to make the Master of the Game a volume of real interest with the members of the Camden Society.

"Yours, my dear Sir,

"Ever sincerely,

"(Signed) Henry Ellis."

When I first read the above letter, I had already decided upon proceeding with the publication of the *Master of Game* on the lines recommended by Sir H. Ellis, though the choice of MS., on the advice of the British Museum experts, had fallen not upon the Shirley MS. but on the Vespasian B XII. By them the latter was pronounced the older MS.—by some twenty or thirty years—and the work of a professional scribe, while the Shirley MS. is the work of an amateur, though of scholarly tastes, and there is a good deal of confusion in the arrangement of the chapters, and an important one is left out altogether.

Full particulars of the various MSS. will be found in the Bibliography.

THE TITLE AND DEDICATION OF THE "MASTER OF GAME"

As the Shirley MS. on every occasion, and the MS. Vespasian B XII. on one of the three

¹ There are at the present time thirteen MSS. of the Master of Game in the British Museum; as detailed in the list that I quote in the Bibliography.

² It should read 17 A LV., probably a clerical error.