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The Origin of  
Romantic Fiction.

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Fabulous narrative, like almost every one of the arts of man, originated in the desire of rendering the great more vast, the rich more splendid, and the gay more beautiful. It removed, as it were, from the hands of fortune, the destinies of mankind, rewarded virtue and valor with success, and covered treachery and baseness with opprobrium.

Men sympathize not with armies or nations, but with individuals; and the poet who sung the fall of empires, was forced to place a few in a prominent light, with whose success or misfortunes his hearers might be affected. Following this argument, it was thought that narratives might be composed where the interest should only be demanded for one or two individuals, whose adventures, happiness, or misery, might of themselves afford delight. The experiment was attended with success; and as men sympathize most readily with events which may occur to themselves, or the situations in which they have been,

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or may be, the incidents of fiction derived their character from the manners of the age. In a gay and luxurious country, stories of love became acceptable; hence the Grecian novels were composed, and as, in relating the adventures of the lovers, it was natural to depict what might really have happened, the general features of the times, the inroads of pirates, religious ceremonies, etc. were chiefly delineated.

Now, when, by some great convulsion, a vast change is effected in manners, the incidents of fiction will necessarily be changed also; first, because the former occurrences become less natural, and secondly, because they give less delight.

Never did a greater change of manners take place, than in the Middle Ages, and, accordingly, we must be prepared to expect a prodigious alteration in the character of fictitious literature, which may be expected to vary with the manners it would describe.

Not only was there a change in the nature of the characters themselves, and the adventures which befell them, but

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a peculiar style of embellishment was also adopted; and this characterization of giants, dragons, and enchanted castles, which forms the seasoning of the adventures of chivalry, has been distinguished by the name of Romantic Fiction.

The extraordinary fables which are so indicative of the Middle Ages, have been successively ascribed to the Northern Scalds, to the Arabians, to the people of Armorica or Brittany, and to the classical tales of antiquity. The supporters of these several systems have seemingly confused three principles which ought to be referred to separate origins. These principles are, first, the arbitrary fictions of romance, such as the embellishments of dragons, enchanters, etc., second, that spirit of enterprise and adventure which pervaded all the tales of chivalry; and third, the historical materials relating to Arthur and Charlemagne, which form the groundwork of so large a proportion of this class of compositions.

So, in deciding between these claims, it is proper to consider the origin of

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these wild and improbable fictions; the rise of that spirit of chivalry which gave birth to the eagerness for single combat; the fondness for roaming in search of adventures, and the obligation of protecting and avenging the fair; and lastly, how these fabulous embellishments, and this spirit of adventure, were appropriated to the story of individual knights, and treated of those materials concerning Arthur and the Round Table, and the Peers of Charlemagne, whose exploits, real or fictitious, have formed the subject of romance.

One theory is, that what are termed the arbitrary fictions of romance have been exclusively derived from the Northern Scalds.

This system has been strenuously upheld by Doctor Percy, who observes that the Scalds originally performed the functions of historians, by recording the victories and genealogies of their princes in a kind of narration song. When history, by being committed to prose, assumed a more stable and simple form, and was taken out of their hands, it became

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their chief business to entertain and delight. Hence they embellished their recitals with marvellous fictions, calculated to allure the gross and ignorant minds of their audience.

Long before the time of the Crusades, they believed in the existence of giants and dwarfs, in spells and enchantments. These became the ornaments of their works of imagination, and they also invented combats with dragons and monsters, and related adventures of knights with giants and sorcerers.

Besides this assumption, Dr. Percy also maintains that the spirit of chivalry, the eagerness after adventure, and the extravagant courtesy, which are its chief characteristics, existed among the northern nations long before the introduction of the feudal system, or the establishment of knighthood as a regular order.

These fictions and ideas, he assumes, were introduced into Normandy by the Scalds, who probably attended the army of Rollo in its migration to that province.

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from the North. The skill of these bards was transmitted to their successors, the minstrels, who adopted the religion and the opinions of the new countries. In place of their pagan ancestors, they substituted the heroes of Christendom, whose feats they embellished with the Scaldic fictions of giants and enchanters. Such stories were speedily propagated through France, and by easy transition, passed into England after the Norman Conquest.

A second hypothesis ascribes to the Saracens the foundation of romantic fiction. It had at one time been a received opinion in Europe, that the wonders of Arabian imagination were first communicated to the western world by means of the Crusades, but Mr Warton, the chief exponent of this view, contends that these fictions were introduced at a much earlier period by the Saracens, who, in the beginning of the eighth century, settled in Spain. Through that country, they disseminated that store of extravagant

inventions peculiar to their fertile genius. The ideal tales of the western invaders, recommended by a brilliancy of description hitherto unknown to the barren fancy of those who inhabited a western region, were rapidly diffused through the continent of Europe. From Spain, through the ports of Toulon and Marseilles, they passed into France. In the latter kingdom, they received the earliest and most welcome reception in the district of Armorica or Britany. That province had largely been peopled by a colony of Welshmen, who had emigrated thither in the fourth century. Hence a close connection existed between Wales and Britany for many ages. Mr. Warton points out the coincidence between fictions, undoubtedly Arabic, and the machinery of the early romances, and concludes with maintaining, that if Europe was in any way indebted to the Scalds for the extravagant stories of giants and monsters, these fables must still be referred to an eastern origin, and must have found their way into the

north of Europe along with an Asiatic nation, who, soon after Mithridates had been overthrown by Pompey, fled from the dominion of the Romans, and under the conduct of Odin, settled in Scandinavia.

These two systems, which may be termed the Gothic and the Arabian, are those which have found the most numerous supporters. As far as relates to the supernatural ornaments of romance, the two theories, though widely different, are not incompatible.

From a view of the character of Arabian and Gothic fiction, it appears that neither is exclusively entitled to the credit of having given birth to the wonders of romance. The early framers of the tales of chivalry may be indebted to the northern bards for those wild and terrible images congenial to a frozen region, and owe to Arabian invention that magnificence and splendor, those glowing descriptions and luxurious ornaments, suggested by the enchanting scenery of an eastern climate.

It cannot be denied that the fictions

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of the Arabians and the Scalds are totally different. The fables and superstitions of the northern bards are of a darker shade, and more savage complexion, than those of the Arabians. There is something in their fictions that chills the imagination; the formidable objects of nature with which they were familiarized in their northern solitudes, their precipices, and frozen mountains, and gloomy forests, acted on their fancy, and gave a shade of horror to their imagery.

Spirits who send storms over the deep, who rejoice in the shriek of the drowning mariner, or diffuse irresistible pestilence; spells which preserve from poison, blunt the weapons of an adversary, or call up the dead from their tombs — these are the ornaments of northern poetry.

The Arabian fictions are of a more splendid nature; they are less terrible indeed, but possess more variety and magnificence; they lead us through delightful forests, and raise up palaces, glittering with gold and diamonds.

Against these claims, it would seem more probable to believe that the pilgrims and palmers who visited the Holy Land, brought back with them the Oriental tales; especially when we consider that the Arabians were not only secluded from the other inhabitants of Spain, but were the objects of their bitterest animosity. It is unfortunate, too, that the intermediate stations between the Moors and the Normans should be placed in Armorica, one of the French provinces most remote from Grenada.

But if Armorica cannot without difficulty be adopted as the resting place of romantic fiction, far less can it be considered its native soil, as has been assumed in a third hypothesis. The Armorican system seems to have arisen from mistaking the collection of materials for the sources whence they derived their embellishments.

A fourth hypothesis has been suggested, which represents the machinery and coloring of fiction, the stories of enchanted gardens, monsters, and

winged steeds, which have been introduced into romance, as derived from the classical and mythological authors; and as being merely the ancient stories of Greece, grafted on modern manners.

Sir John Mandeville makes frequent allusions to ancient fables; and many rites of the Latin Church have been derived from pagan ceremonies.

This at least is certain, that the classical system presents the most numerous and least objectionable prototypes of the fables of romance.

In many of the tales of chivalry, there is a knight detained from his quest by the enchantments of a sorceress, and who is nothing more than the Calypso or Circe of Homer. The heroes of the Iliad and the Aeneid were both furnished with enchanted armor; while the expedition of Jason in search of the Golden Fleece, and the apples of the Hesperides, guarded by dragons, are akin to the fables introduced by the Arabians.

Some of the less familiar fables,

as the image, in the Phrygony of Hesiod, of the murky prisons in which the Titans were pent up by Jupiter, under the custody of strong armed giants, bear a striking resemblance to the more wild sublimity of the Gothic fictions.

Besides, a great number of those fables now considered as eastern, appear to have originally Greek traditions, which were carried to Persia in the time of Alexander the Great, and were afterwards returned to Europe with the modifications they had received from oriental ideas. As a confirmation of the classical theory, in the thirteenth century, many classical stories appeared, both in prose, and in a metrical form, veiled in the garb of romantic fiction.

Of this sort were the Latin works of Dares Phrygius, and Dictys Cretensis, concerning the wars of Troy; and the still more ample chronicle of Guido de Colonna; and formed from these authors, the French metrical work of Benoît de Saint More.

Although the theories which have been explained may be sufficient to account for the origin of the supernatural ornaments

of romance, still they are to be considered merely as embellishments of those chivalrous adventures which occupy by far the greatest proportion of romantic compilation.

It is true that a striking analogy exists between the manners of the heroic and the Gothic times; but the resemblances arose merely from a corresponding state of manners; since, at a similar stage of the social progress, similar ideas and customs are prevalent amongst different nations.

Still less can it be believed that the spirit of chivalry received its impulse from the knight errantry of Arabia.

With the fall of the Roman Empire, began feudalism; and with feudalism came chivalry, while out of chivalry grew the romances of the Middle Ages.

We may divide these prose romances into four classes:—

First, those relating to Arthur and the Round Table.

Second, those connected with Charlemagne and his Paladins.

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Third, the Spanish and Portuguese romances, which chiefly contain the adventures of the imaginary families of Amadis and Palmerin.

Fourth, what may be termed classical romances, which represent the heroes of antiquity in the guise of romantic fiction.

The legends of Arthur and the Round Table demand the first and principal attention.

These originated in the early and chimerical legends of Armorica and Wales, the ancient Latin chronicles of the island, and the subsequent metrical romances of the English and Norman minstrels.

The annals and poetry of Wales had long labored in Arthur's commendation. Compelled to yield their country, the Welsh avenged themselves on the Saxons by creating in the person of Arthur, not only a phantom of glory which towered above every other warrior, but a political saviour, who, like the Barbarossa of German popular superstition, was only temporarily hid,

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and would one day reappear and reassert the national independence.

The Archdeacon of Oxford amassed a large collection of these materials during an expedition to Britany, and on his return to England, presented the medley to Geoffrey of Monmouth, who founded on them a chronicle of Britain, which was written in Latin prose, and finished about 1140. This chronicle consists of nine books, each of which is divided into chapters, and commences with the history of Brutus, the son of Sylvius, and grandson of Ascanius, who, being exiled from Italy, takes refuge in Greece. There he obtains the hand of Imogen, daughter of a king of that country, and a fleet, with which he arrives in Albion, and founds the kingdom of Britain.

There is next presented an account of the fabulous race of Brutus, particularly Arthur, and the whole concludes with the reign of Cadwallader, one of the descendants of that hero.

Nothing is said of the exploits of Tristan and Lancelot, or the conquest of the Sangreal

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or Holy Grail, which constitute so large a proportion of the Round Table romances, which were subsequent additions, though probably derived from the ancient British originals.

The work of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and such traditionary fables, were the foundation of those tales which appeared in a metrical form, the shape in which romance was first exhibited.

Of the French metrical romances, there is one founded on the chronicle of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and entitled "Le Brut," written in 1155, by Robert Wace; "Le Roman Le Rou," by the same author; and the "Chevalier au Lion," by Chrestien de Troyes.