

**THE HISTORY OF
THE SEVEN WISE
MASTERS OF ROME**

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The History of the Seven Wise Masters of Rome by George Laurence Gomme

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GEORGE LAURENCE GOMME

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Rome . . . Seven Wise Masters . . .
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THE HISTORY
OF
THE SEVEN WISE MASTERS
OF ROME.

PRINTED FROM
THE EDITION OF WYNKYN DE WORDE, 1520,
AND EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION,

BY
GEORGE LAURENCE GOMME, F.S.A.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR THE VILLON SOCIETY.

1885.

Introduction.

The history of the *Seven Wise Masters* forms an important epoch in the history of European popular stories, because it affords the most remarkable evidence of the literary descent and origin of stories, as distinct from a traditional descent. Professor Comparetti in his *Researches respecting the Book of Sindibad*, published by the Folk-Lore Society, Mr. Clouston in his *Bakhtyar Nama* and in his *Book of Sindibad*, two privately printed books, and Mr. Wright in his *Sevyn Sages*, printed by the Percy Society in 1846, have practically exhausted the literary history of this famous collection of stories. Shortly summarised from these three sources the main facts are these. There was an ancient original Indian book of stories which became so popular that it was copied frequently, and thus handed down from one generation to another. From this book two separate groups of texts have descended. To the first belong all the texts in the Eastern languages; to the other belong the *Dolopathos*, the *Historia Septem Sapientum*, the *Erasto*, and other numerous texts of the various European literatures of the Middle Ages. With the Eastern group of texts we have now

nothing to do beyond saying that Professor Comparetti has restored, in the scholarly book above mentioned, the form of the original text for the guidance of the modern student. The Western group of texts has a history of its own quite apart from its Eastern origin. It has kept the original framework, but it has varied the setting; and this variation will be found of great interest to the student of popular tradition. Before, however, we come to this part of the subject, let us see the kind of work with which we are dealing. The framework of the romance is as follows: A young prince, falsely accused by the wife of the king, his father, of having attempted to offer her violence, is defended by seven sages, who relate a series of stories to show the deceits of women, the queen at the same time urging the death of the accused prince by the example of stories told by herself. This system of story-telling is practically the same as that adopted in the *Arabian Nights*. Boccaccio adopted this plan in his *Decameron*; Chaucer adopted it in his *Canterbury Tales*.

Among the Eastern texts is a famous one in Hebrew, dating as far back as the first half of the thirteenth century. Under the title of *Historia Septem Sapientum Romæ*, a Latin translation of this was made by Dam Jehans, a monk of the abbey of Haute Selve, in the diocese of Nancy, in the thirteenth century. The earliest printed copy of this version that I have been able to find is one printed at Cologne in 1490, of which I shall say something a little further on.

It was through this Latin version that the work was communicated to nearly all the languages of Western Europe; and in 1520 a translation into English was printed by the famous printer Wynkyn de Worde. A fine copy of this is preserved in the British Museum, and from it is printed the text of the present version. One or two pages are missing from this copy; and the passages are restored from the earliest chap-book version which I have been able to discover—namely, that printed in 1671 at London, and belonging to the British Museum. This chap-book version is nearly identical with the Wynkyn de Worde, with the simple alteration of the spelling to the modern forms. One curious variation, however, illustrating the force of the change of religious opinions at the time of the Reformation, is well worth noting. On page 173 of our text will be found related how the murdered children of the Emperor Lodwyke were found alive singing “of ye moost blessed vyrgyne Mary, aue Maria gracia plena dñs tecum,” but in the chap-book of 1671 it is said they were singing praises to the Almighty.

Since 1671 many chap-book versions have been issued, and I have succeeded in obtaining a copy still published in Dublin. These later versions are all much deteriorated from the original. Besides the 1671 edition, there are the following: London 1684, 1687, and 1697; Glasgow 1713; London [1750]; Newcastle 1750; London 1780-7 [1785]; Boston 1794; London 1805; Warrington 1815. And I have no

doubt that it has been continually reproduced until the present day.

Besides the closeness of the translation of the prose version of *Wynkyn de Worde*, one curious feature to be noted is the series of illustrations. It is well known that German woodcuts supplied English books with illustrations,* and this is a good instance of the practice. In the *Bibliographer* (vol. ii. p. 70) Mr. W. M. Conway has told the history of the woodcuts of the Lubeck edition of the *Seven Wise Men*. It was first printed in April, 1488, with the name of Claes Leeu, probably a brother of Gerard Leeu. In 1490 appeared another edition printed at Cologne by J. Koelhof de Lubeck, to whom the blocks must have been lent. He returned them to Leeu with the exception of one, which was either retained by him or lost on the journey; and the imperfect set, a new block being made by some other hand to replace the lost one, was employed in the edition printed by Leeu on the 6th November, 1490. One of the cuts (see p. 21) represents the Emperor coming angrily into the chamber of his wife with a drawn sword in his hand and reproaching her with her infidelity. She is seated on a chair on the right, with her hands clasped in an attitude rather of shyness than fear or remorse. One reason for this seems to be discoverable from the fact that along the top of the bed behind, the words *Ave regina caelorum* can be traced carved in reverse; and it is quite possible that the whole cut, with the

* See *Antiquary*, vol. v. p. 157.

exception of the figure of the Emperor, was copied from some print representing the Annunciation.

Both these editions, that by J. Koelhof de Lubeck and that printed by Gerard Leeu on 6th November, 1490, are in the library of the British Museum, the latter under the title of *Historia de Calumnia Novercali*. This book has a preface not contained in the other edition, and it formed the subject of a communication to the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1767, p. 541, in a letter signed T. From this letter it would appear that later editions were issued. The preface quoted in the letter is the same as the preface in the British Museum copy, but the words of the latter are much more contracted than the writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* indicates was the case with his copy. This letter is, I think, worth reproducing, as it conveys some useful information. It is as follows :—

“ I lately met with a mutilated copy of a book, which to me, at least, appears a curiosity. It bears for its title, *Historia de Calumnia Novercali*; an history now commonly sold at stalls for the entertainment of English children, under the title of *The History of the Seven Wise Masters*; with which last-mentioned book mine agrees as to the substance and order of the tales, but differs considerably from it in the form and manner of relating them.

“ It is printed in sixteens, in the common Gothic character of the time (the beginning, as I judge, of the 16th century), an English or black face approaching to a Roman, on a pica body,

and with many abbreviations, and is ornamented with wooden cuts of the size of the pages, which, considering their age, are by no means contemptible.

“The preface runs thus:—

“Compositâ pridem *Calumniæ Novercalis Historia* quæ *Septem Sapientum* dicitur, pulchro quidem argumento, pulchris etiam ac memoratu dignis tractata exemplis, in utramq: partem & defensionis & condemnationis sive vera sive ficta sit, nihil ad te attinere puto mi *Gerarde*: magis autem quid doceat adverte, intelligimus ex ea & qui sint malarum mulierum, & pravorum liberorum, & zelotyporum itemq: delirorum senum aliarumq: personarum mores atq: fortunæ variâ ratione, ut quid caveri quidve eligi oporteat agnoscamus. Cum autem nominum quorundam ratio temporibus satis respondere visa non esset, & textus nimium fluxus minimeq: cohærens videretur non indignum judicavi quo tibi morem gererem id postulanti, paululum mutatis verbis obmissisq: nominibus ne legentem offendant, re ipsa integra servata, hanc narrationem efferre; ne quid inventori laudis aut inventioni veritatis detractum esse videatur: imposito potius nomine *Calumniæ Novercalis* qualis & Phædræ fuit is *Hyppolitus*; et simili quoq: genere uxoris *Putipharis* in *Joseph Hebræum*; & senum illorum in *Susannam*; ut eo nomine historia hæc majorem notitiam gratiamq: apud lectores sit habitura.”

“From hence it appears that this book is an alteration and improvement of a more ancient work, intitled *Historia Septem*