

**CHAP-BOOKS AND FOLK-  
LORE TRACTS, FIRST SERIES,  
II: THE HISTORY OF THE SEVEN  
WISE MASTERS OF ROME**

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Chap-books and folk-lore tracts, first series, II: The history of the seven wise masters of Rome  
by George Laurence Gomme

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**GEORGE LAURENCE GOMME**

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LORE TRACTS, FIRST SERIES,  
II: THE HISTORY OF THE SEVEN  
WISE MASTERS OF ROME**



*Chap-Books*  
and  
*Folk-Lore Tracts.*

*Edited by*

*G. L. Gomme, F.S.A.*

and

*H. B. Wheatley, F.S.A.*

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*First Series.*

**II.**

Handwritten scribbles and lines, possibly a signature or initials.

Handwritten text, possibly a list or notes, consisting of several lines of illegible characters.

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.

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LONDON:  
PRINTED FOR THE VILLON SOCIETY.

1885.





## Introduction.

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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