LITERATURE

The literature of the Muslim Orient seems so remote from us that probably not one reader in a thousand has ever connected it in his mind with our own. The student of literary history, on the other hand, who knows how much in European literature has at different times been claimed, and how little has ever been proved, to be of oriental origin, may well be inclined to regard the whole subject with tolerant scepticism. There are certain facts, of course, which no one disputes. The oriental apologue and other works of its class enjoyed wide popularity in the Middle Ages. The first book printed in England, The Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers, was a translation from a French version of a Latin recast of an Arabic work of this type. In the eighteenth century, again, the Arabian Nights ran through at least thirty editions in English and French, and has since been published more than three hundred times in all the languages of western Europe. Omar Khayyam is a name more familiar in England and America than in Persia. But are these merely isolated intrusions from the East, or do they illustrate a general tendency, and if so, how did such tendencies arise and what influence did they exert on the general course of literature? Unfortunately few of these questions may be answered with any finality, and little more can be attempted here than to suggest, on such evidence as is available, the lines along which an answer may be sought.

There is no more delicate problem than to assess the factors which determine the nature and degree of influence exerted by one literature upon another. The existence of a prolonged and close historical contact is clearly not necessary, though such contacts do invariably leave their mark on the literature of one or both of the peoples concerned. Nor does it seem to matter whether their historical relations are in the main friendly or hostile; the history of all the literatures of Europe serves to prove that literary fashions and movements do not stop at military frontiers. More essential than historical contact, and more difficult to prove by ordinary historical methods, is the fact of intercommunication. Whether it be personal or bilateral, or, as more frequently happens, scholastic and unilateral, it is only by literary analysis in the last resort that its existence can be affirmed or denied.

The most important factor is the most elusive of all. Before any kind of transference is possible there must be a condition of receptivity on one or both sides—a willingness to take what the other has to give, an implied recognition of its superiority in one or another field. It requires no close investigation to show that European receptivity of Arabic or Persian literary modes has been strictly limited both in time and in scope. There can be no comparison between the steady permeation of Western literature by Latin and, since the Renaissance, by Greek influences, and its fitful and half-concealed adaptation of elements of Eastern literature. There has scarcely been anything approaching a transference of any oriental literary art as a whole into European literature, but single elements of technique and occasionally certain established literary motives have been successfully transplanted. Why these should have been selected and the others left is a problem largely of national or popular psychology. It may be remarked, however, that oriental literature has exerted an influence less through its differences from that of Europe than through its similarities. The literary taste of Europe consistently rejected the strikingly unfamiliar features of Eastern literature, and was attracted instead to those elements of which the germ already existed, or had begun to develop in a tentative way, in European thought and letters. In such cases the oriental parallels served as a key to the door at which the West was knocking, or by their colour and brilliance of technique acquired such popular favour that they illuminated the lines along which the European movement should proceed. This is not to imply
that they set a standard or served as models to be slavishly imitated; on the contrary, the branch of letters to which their impulse had been applied afterwards developed or expanded along its own peculiar lines, without reference to the East, and often in complete ignorance of its oriental forerunners.

Any attempt to draw an analogy between the influences exerted by oriental and classical literature respectively overlooks the difference between them, a difference not merely of degree, but of kind. 'The literature of Arabia and Persia is essentially 'romantic'. The student brought up to Greek ideals of literary excellence will find in it few of those qualities which constitute the perennial fascination of Greek literature. There is as full, or fuller, mastery of form, but it is rigid where Greek is various, and extravagant where Greek is severe. The classics achieve greatness by restraint and simplicity, the oriental weaves a laborious fabric of precious and obscure language, decorated with imagery often far-fetched and fantastic. The Greek appeals through beauty to the intellect, the Arab or Persian through richness of colour to the senses and the imagination. The assertion that Greek literature is creative, oriental literature fundamentally imitative and poor in intellectual qualities, though not without an element of truth, is an over-bearing and extravagant generalization. Where the Muslim writer excels is in clothing the essential realism of his thought with the language of romance. But it would be false to conclude from this that there is an essential antithesis between the oriental spirit and the spirit of Europe. The antithesis exists, but it is between the oriental spirit and the classical spirit. Classicism in European literature has always been imposed from above; the literature of the people—especially in the north and west—shows closer kinship with the spirit of oriental literature. Their mutual feeling of remoteness is due to their isolation and ignorance; whenever a channel has been opened between them, the flow of oriental influence has generally brought such an access of

strength to the popular currents in European literature as to enable them to challenge more or less successfully the classical supremacy.

The very fact of the popular appeal and transmission of oriental elements in the Middle Ages has still further obscured the process, rendering it more complicated in its effect and often difficult to prove by ordinary methods of historical criticism, the more so that most of the popular literature on both sides has perished. Even yet our literary histories show traces of the contemptuous aloofness which both Arabic writers and European scholars generally adopted towards the songs and tales of the people. There is every reason to believe that the modern study of folk-literature will throw fuller light on the diffusion throughout western Europe of both materials and technique derived immediately from the East. It is possible that this influence was at work already in the eighth century, but it is principally with the development of the vernacular literatures that the question of oriental contacts arises.

The very first problem is perhaps the most difficult, and certainly the most disputed. A new type of poetry, with a new theme, a new social psychology, and a new technique suddenly comes into existence in southern France at the end of the eleventh century. There is little in the earlier literature of France which points in the direction of this development; on the other hand, the new poetry bears some strong resemblances to a certain type of contemporary poetry in Arabic Spain. What could be more natural than to suppose that the first Provençal poets were influenced by Arabic models? For several centuries this view met with almost unquestioned acceptance. It was never more confidently or sweepingly asserted than by Giam-

1 See in Professor Leo Wiener's ingenious arguments for Gothic mediation of Arabic influences (Contributions towards a History of Arabic-Gothic Culture, vol. i. New York, 1917), more especially the chapter on Virgilius Maro the grammarian.
meria Barbieri in the full tide of the classical revival. On the revival of medieval studies at the end of the eighteenth century, when public imagination was still obsessed with oriental romance, the general opinion, led by Sismondi and Fauriel, maintained the close association of Provençal with Arabic poetry. It was only in mid-nineteenth century that there appeared a revulsion, among both orientalists and students of Romance philology. The critics demanded documentary evidence of contacts between Provence and Andalusia, and failing to find them swung to the other extreme. If one may without malice attribute some share in the reaction to the overheated nationalism which animated all the western nations, it must be conceded that no self-respecting Romance scholar was likely to defend the theory of Arabic influences in the face of the contemptuous pronouncement of the famous Orientalist Dozy: ‘Nous considérons cette question comme tout à fait oiseuse; nous voudrions ne plus la voir débattue, quoique nous soyons convaincus qu’elle le sera pendant longtemps encore. A chacun son cheval de bataille!’ On this ground the prevailing opinion appears to have taken its stand; Monsieur Anglade, for instance, is categorical: ‘Ainsi fond et forme, les troubadours ont tout créé’.

Yet in spite of the assurance with which both positive and negative pronouncements have been made, both rest in fact upon little more than guesswork. Of systematic research into the problem from the orientalist side there has until recently been little or none, but the new evidence now coming to light goes far to remove all doubts that something at least of the poetic achievement of the south did in fact influence the earliest Provençal poets.  

1 Dell'Origine della Poesia Rima (published by Tiraboschi, Modena, 1779).
3 It need hardly be said that in what follows there is no intention of denying

The novelty of Provençal poetry lies not in the theme itself, but in the conventional treatment of the theme. This palpitating love, expressed with such a wealth of fantastic imagery and literary refinement, is not the love expressed in the simple and passionate songs of the people. It is a sentimental doctrine, a romantic cult, a pathological condition which can be artificially stimulated, which finds its ideal not in the maiden but in the wife, from whose worship and service derives an ethical force by which the poet's life is enriched and ennobled. Whence came this art of love, this cult of the dame? Not from the manners of the time, as they are reflected in the literature of the people, whether Teutonic or Romance. ‘Women’, wrote Brunetièr, ‘in the bourgeois life of the Middle Ages seem to have bowed the head as low as in any age and in any place on earth beneath the law of force and brutality.’ Nor was it by any means implicit in the new ideals of chivalry, which were beginning to inspire the upper classes. Such artificial sentimentality has nothing in common with its warrior creed. The feminine ideal of the new cult is flatly opposed to the Church's ideal of virginity. Had it arisen out of the natural relations between the professional poet and his patroness, its tone had been humble. Greek and Latin literature, whether of the Golden or of the Silver Ages, offers little which could serve as its psychological basis. Yet it obviously depends upon an established literary tradition, and a possible source for that literary tradition may at least be looked for in the poetry of Arabic Spain.

By the eleventh century Arabic poetry could look back on a long perspective of growth and development. But far as it might go there was never a time when love was not one of its main-springs. In the old art-poetry of the desert, with its con-

the influence of other cultural sources, Latin, Celtic, &c., or of ruling out a certain measure of indigenous development.

votional pictures expressed in polished language, elaborate similes, complex metres, and faultless rhymes (for Arabic was the first of the western languages to insist on perfect rhyme as an essential element in its poetry), every ode must open with a lament for the parting from some beloved, whose memory is evoked by revisiting a deserted camping-ground. As poetry migrated to the town, the love motive asserted itself more strongly, and a new delicacy replaced the frank hedonism of the desert. The ode gave place to the short lyric, in which the poet expressed his own personality and emotions. For a few decades Arabian poetry enjoyed a new spring, free, laughter-loving, true to life, before the lyric in its turn became stylized and conventional. Among the court poets, on the one hand, it gave rise to the sentimental lyric and delicate trifle, in which sensuous music combined with literary artifice to replace the warmth of genuine emotion. Among the people it was pressed into the service of a new art, the romance of the love-crazed swain whose life is consumed in pure devotion to an unattainable and idealized mistress. Among the mystics, again, the elements of idealism in these portrayals of an exalted and spiritual love were seized upon to serve as an allegory of the soul’s unceasing devotion to the beloved. The bold and sensuous imagery of earthly love dominates the mystical poetry alike of Arab and Persian. Turgid, ecstatic, and expressed with traditional Arab fantasy by some Arab poets, sublimized and refined in others by metaphysical speculations, amongst the Persians it takes on a new sweetness and simplicity, graced with the rich imagery which springs naturally from the Persian imagination. Each of these types of love-lyric was destined to play a part in the history of European literature.

The most noteworthy feature of this new lyrical poetry was the emergence of a definite literary scheme of platonic love, combined with a social and ethical theory of love which was the distinctive contribution of Arabia. Already by the end of the

eighth century some of the poets at the court at Baghdad were devoting their muse exclusively to this art of love. Less than a century later a boy barely in his teens, the son and successor of the founder of the most austere religious school in Islam, codified the scheme in a work of singular charm. In the *Book of Venus* Ibn Dāwūd arranged, classified, and illustrated in verse all the aspects of love, its nature, laws, forms of expression and effects, in the spirit of the ideal put by Islamic tradition into the mouth of the Prophet: ‘Whoever loves and conceals his love, remains chaste and dies, that one is a martyr.’

The unity of culture in the Muslim world ensured the cultivation of these poetic arts in Spain also. But here they developed farther on independent lines, through the assimilation and coalition of Spanish and Arabic elements in the population, and under the stimulus of the constant struggle with the Christian powers of the North. In no period of Arabic literature was there more widely diffused among all classes the spirit of poetry, the receptivity of mind and heart to impressions of beauty and the power of clothing these impressions in language both emotional and exquisite. Of these countless poets, named and nameless, the lyrics of the cavalier Sa’d ibn Jūdī quoted by Dozy¹ may serve as examples. Here too the ideal of platonic love found universal acceptance. The name of Ibn Ḥazm is proverbial in Islam for religious puritanism and biting controversy, and honoured in the West as that of the founder of the science of comparative religion. Yet this man wrote and illustrated with his own verse a treatise on love which rivals and perhaps surpasses the *Book of Venus*.² He accepts the Platonic theory of love as the means whereby the severed portions of one sublime essence attain to earthly union, and in this spirit of purest


romanticism unfolds an anatomy of love which is in many respects that of the troubadours of the next century, but to whose glowing altitudes they seldom attained.

Though so much of Spanish-Arabic poetry was natural and spontaneous, what has come down to us is mostly the carefully polished work of the court poets and poetesses, the aristocracy of their craft, with whom even princes and ministers did not disdain to compete, nay, who were themselves princes and ministers. In this courtly flower of Spanish-Arabic culture a new poetic technique was gradually built up. Alongside the epigram and the monorhymed piece, with its verses of equal length and caesura, the Andalusian love-lyric began to show a preference for new stanza forms, with elaborate internal rhymes and complex metrical schemes. Though these metres are still syllabic it seems but a step to the poetry of the troubadours. That too was essentially art-poetry, the production of courtiers and court-poets, with artificial conventions and complex stanzas. There remains one difficulty. None of the early troubadours knew Arabic; who were the middlemen who transmitted the art from Andalusia to Provence?

It must be frankly conceded that a complete solution of this problem cannot yet be given, though much water has flowed under the bridge since Dozy's time. It is now proved beyond all question\(^1\) that not only were the 'Moors' of Andalusia overwhelmingly Spanish in blood, but that all, from highest to lowest, understood and spoke Romance familiarly and habitually. These Spanish Muslims, while they absorbed Arabic culture, also contributed to it, and to their collaboration Spanish-Arabic culture owed many of its distinctive excellences. The Christians of Andalusia, who had become half-Arabized (as is implied by their name of Mozárabes) and were often conversant with Arabic literature, in their turn communicated many seeds


of Islamic culture to the northern kingdoms. Some such process of interaction underlies the history of Andalusian and of much Spanish poetry. The Spanish genius played a large part in the development of strophic measures, but in return the refinements of technique imposed by Arabic laws of forms and metre upon the strophe in its literary form (the *mwaṣṣāḥ* or the *zajal*) were reproduced in the popular bilingual ballad (the *zajal*), and thence found their way into purely romance poetry. The identity of the popular *villancico* with the *zajal* is scarcely open to question, and there is no reason to assume that such interaction was limited to technique or only to one kind of poetry, however few the proved Arabic elements in the *Romancero* generally may be. The *Crónica general* supplies an analogous example in Spanish prose literature of the combination of both Arabic and Spanish tradition.\(^2\)

The medium of transmission was thus the popular *zajal* and its romance equivalent, the *villancico*. Fortunately one precious fragment of this popular literature has escaped destruction. This is a collection of some 150 pieces written in the vulgar mixed dialect in the early part of the twelfth century by the Andalusian poet Ibn Quzmān, who, though himself contemporary with the early troubadours, was by his own confession following an established tradition in Andalusia. The technique of his poetry is Arabic in its finish and rhymes, but already the prosodic revolution is complete—the metres are accentual, not syllabic. His stanzas are skilfully constructed with a view to the needs of choral singing, since most of his poems are (as Ribera has shown) dramatic episodes intended for performance by street minstrels. A comparison of these stanzas with the metrical systems of the first Provençal poets reveals some remarkable analogies. The poems of William of Poitiers are written in metres sometimes identical with those of Ibn Quzmān, some-

times with slight variations which appear to be adaptations to monody of a scheme originally devised for choral singing. Moreover, the very licence and caprice of the Provençal poets shows that they were using metres which had no established traditions or raison d'être amongst them, whereas Andalusian choral poetry was kept by its musical and rhythmical necessities so true to type, that its influence can still be distinguished from that of Provençal poetry in the poems of Alfonso the Wise and later Spanish poets.¹

A final point still remains to be dealt with. Ibn Quzmân’s poems by no means reflect either the elevated sentiments of the court poetry of Andalusia or the honest romance of popular ballads. Although some of William of Poitiers’s productions are not very far removed from the same gutters morality, there is a world of contrast between the tone of this Andalusian popular poetry and the conventional idealism of Provençal court-poetry. But Ibn Quzmân represents a startling degeneration in Spanish-Arabic society, and it is more than probable—judging from casual references in the Arabic writers to popular versions of famous poems—that in other popular productions (especially in the eleventh century, when the culture of Andalusia was at its most brilliant) the ideals of the court-poetry were more faithfully reflected.

From this brief review of the evidence it seems clear that, in view of the number and character of the coincidences between the court-poetry of Andalusia and the poetry of Provence, the theory of transmission cannot be simply waved aside. There are still many points which need to be cleared up, and there are other questions also, that of the musical accompaniment of Andalusian and Provençal poetry, for example,² which may throw much light on the problem. But for the present the claim that Arabic poetry contributed in some measure to the rise of the new poetry of Europe appears to be justified, if we cannot yet go all the way with Professor Mackail in asserting that ‘As Europe owes its religion to Judæa, so it owes its romance to Arabia’.¹

The second area from which Arabic influences were transmitted to Europe was the Norman kingdom of Sicily, whose traditions were continued more especially by the Emperor Frederick II. That Arabic poetry was cultivated at the court of the Norman kings admits of no doubt. But it was only under Frederick that the Sicilian school arose (unless all earlier works have perished), and at Frederick’s court, as at that of Alfonso the Wise of Castile, though we hear much of translations of Arabic books and much about Muslim philosophy, and much too about Provençal and native troubadours, there is no definite mention of Arabic poets or poetry. On the other hand, Saracen ballerinas and singing-girls were certainly to be found in Frederick’s suite. The cautious historian of medieval Sicily, while admitting that if we knew more of Sicilian-Arabic popular poetry we might possibly discover closer ties between it and the early Italian poetry in Sicily, goes no further than to claim that of Romance poetry might be re-studied from this point of view. Fauriel (iii. 326) has demonstrated the Arabic origin of gualabia, and Singer has referred to the sendhel, the word midnos, and gvardar (Arabic rogb). F. W. Halluck threw out a hint that zama was suggested by bayt (‘house’, used in Arabic for a verse of poetry). The tashu resembles the Arabic šūnūs in both function and name. Ribera (Disertaciones, 87, ii. 133–49) gives Arabo-Persian derivations for a number of other words, including trobar, which he derives from parab — music, song. But even if trobar is to be connected with trouver, it is interesting to note that the Arabic waqada means also ‘feel the pangs of love or sorrow’.

¹ Lectures on Poetry (1911), p. 97; cf. p. 123. ‘To the kindred stocks of the Arabo-Syrian plateau—for of that single race and region Palestine is also a part—we owe largely or even mainly the vital forces which make the Middle Ages spiritually and imaginatively different from the world ruled over by Rome.’

² See Ribera, Historia de la música arábe medieval, 1927, and H. G. Farmer, Historical Facts for the Arabian Musical Influence, 1930. It may be suggested also, in the modest obscurity of a footnote, that the technical terms
the cultivation of poetry in the vulgar tongue was due to the example of the Arabic poets and the patronage they enjoyed from Muslim rulers. Yet it is a significant fact that the metric of the early popular poetry of Italy, as represented by the canticles of Jacopone di Todi and the carnival songs, and with more elaboration in the ballata, is identical with that of the popular poetry of Andalusia. Even Petrarch’s violent nationalist outburst against the Arabs proves at least, if it proves anything, that the more popular kind of Arabic poetry was still known in Italy in his day.

Whatever place may be assigned to Arabic poetry in stimulating the poetic genius of the Romance peoples, the debt of medieval Europe to Arabic prose literature is hardly open to question, though still far from explored in detail. The vogue of Arabic philosophical and scientific works brought with it an interest in other sides of Arabic literature, more especially in the apologetes, fables, and tales, which constitute the bulk of Arabic belles-lettres. Already before this, however, oral transmission had broadcast elements of Arabic and other oriental story over a wide area. Until recently an oriental origin was claimed and accepted for the popular tales which flourished in Europe, in the various forms of fabliaux, contes, exemplars, &c., during the thirteenth century, and which unquestionably present analogies with oriental and Indian tales. Although the exhaustive researches of Professor Bédier have now seriously weakened the arguments in support of this view, there are still

1 M. Amari, Storia dei Musulmani di Sicilia, 1868–72, iii. 738, 889. See also G. Cesareo, Le Origini della Poesia lirica e la Poesia Siciliana sotto gli Svevi, 1924, pp. 101, 107.
2 See J. M. Millán, Influencia de la poesía popular hispánica-musulmana en la poesía italiana, Revista de Archivos, &c., 1920, 1921. It is worth noting also that the Sicilian Richard of San Germano shows a characteristic feature of Arabic historical composition in the insertion of poems and verses into his chronicle.
3 Epist. Sen. xii. 2.

large sections of popular literature which contain at least episodes from eastern story. Close analogies have been pointed out between Arabic romances and the story of Isolde Blanche main, the German Rolandized, and other northern tales. The author of one version of the Grail-saga even mentions an Arabic book as his source. The Arabic inspiration demonstrated for the Old French romance of Floire et Blanchefleur is the more significant because of its relationship with the lovely Aucassin et Nicolette, which itself bears unmistakable witness to its Spanish-Arabic provenance in the Arabic name of the hero (al-Qasim) and in several details of the setting. Nor does it in any way rob the French jongleur of the credit due to the creator of a masterpiece of beauty and delicacy to suggest that the chante-fable, unique in European literature, is a favourite form of popular Arabic romance.

Arabic travel-literature and cosmography have also left their traces in western literature, as was only to be expected when to travel implied for Europe mainly going on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was almost inevitable with oral transmission that the fabulous and marvellous elements should have spread farthest. They supplied embroideries for Marco Polo and ‘Sir John Mandeville’ amongst others, but their range was not limited to the Latin countries of the West. They penetrated even to Ireland and Scandinavia—possibly by way of the Caspian-Baltic trade-route—and reappear in such monastic tales as the Legend of St. Brendan. Merchants and jongleurs brought them back from the crusading states in Syria and the ports of the Levant. It was from oral sources, in all probability, that Boccaccio derived the oriental tales which he inserted in the Decameron. Chaucer’s Squire’s Tale is an ‘Arabian Nights’
story, which was probably brought to Europe by Italian merchants from the Black Sea, since the scene is laid at the court of the Mongol Khan on the Volga.

At Saray in the land of Tartarye.

The oral dissemination of Arabic tales was supplemented in the fourteenth century by numerous translations of Arabic collections of stories made for the entertainment of the new reading classes. These oriental tales were preferred to the popular mediaeval stock, not only because of their variety and polished literary presentation, but above all because they displayed a richer imagination and a more edifying aim. Here the Christian and Islamic Middle Ages met on common ground, both in literary preferences and literary methods. The people told stories because they liked them, and in general their stories were intended to serve no moral purpose. But the story as a literary art takes its place in a moral framework. The general purpose of the writer is to define the art of government, or the duty of good living, or the profession of the virtues. Of such works there was an immense number in Arabic, drawn partly from the stories of old Indian fable, partly from other repertories in the East (including no doubt much of Greek origin), and partly from historical and legendary episodes in eastern history. There was no conception, of course, of literary proprietorship. Neither in Islam nor Christendom did either author or reader lay any weight on originality of material or power of psychological invention. The art of the moralizer (leaving aside for the present the question of literary style) lay in his faculty of selection and combination, in exhibiting familiar materials in a new setting. Thus the Arabic apologies came to play a great part in medieval and later European literature, passing from land to land, and inspiring as well as entering into much of the original composition of the time.

Of the many works of this type which were translated from

Arabic, chiefly by Jews, three may be selected as typical of the rest. The Arabic Book of Sindbad (not the Sailor), which was derived from a Sanskrit original, and is now, like the original itself, lost, was the medieval source of a number of versions, amongst others of a Syriac version (Sindbān), from which the medieval Greek Syntipas was derived, a Hebrew version (Sindabār), and several Persian versions, some of which, retranslated into Arabic and Turkish, were destined to reach Europe in the eighteenth century. The Hebrew Sindabār is the probable original on the one hand of the thirteenth-century Spanish Libro de los Enganos, on the other of the fourteenth-century Latin Historia Septem Sapientium, which was the source of several verse romances, amongst them the English Seven Sages of Rome.

The second work was a collection of sayings of the ancient philosophers, compiled in Egypt in the eleventh century by a certain Mubashshir ibn Fātik. This was translated into Spanish under the title of Bocados de oro, while the other western versions were based on a Latin translation (Liber philosphorum moralium), from which Guillaume de Tignonville made his version Les dix meaux des philosophes, translated into English by Earl Rivers as The Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers, and already noted as the first English book printed by Caxton.

The influence of these and similar works is most obvious in Spanish literature, especially in the earlier period. From them, for example, the Infante Don John Manuel (who was himself familiar with Arabic) drew the inspiration for El Conde Lucanor, in which even the prologue is modelled on the introductions with which all Arabic works are furnished.1 There are indeed few early prose writings in Spanish which did not draw on materials translated from Arabic. But it has frequently been

1 It cannot be proved, however, that Don John borrowed directly from Arabic sources (cf. G. Maldenehauer, Die Legende von Brutam und Josaphat, 1929, 90–4).
remarked that the Arabic literary tradition was not directly
disseminated from Spain; medieval Europe stood here, as in
many other matters, on the shoulders of Italy and southern
France, and only in much later days were such Arabic influ-
ences as had entered into Spanish literature transmitted to
France and England.

The same comparative isolation of Spain is seen in the case of
the third and still more famous collection, the animal fables
of Sanskrit origin, which were translated into Arabic in the eighth
century under the title of Kalila and Dimna. This was retrans-
lated into Spanish for Alfonso the Wise (1252-84), but the rest
of Europe knew it only in a Latin translation, entitled Direc-
torium humanae vitae, made in the same century by John of
Capua, a converted Jew. This version was drawn upon for other
Latin works, such as the Gesta Romanorum, and it was not until
1552 that it was first translated into the vernacular by Doni.
The subsequent fortunes of this oriental tale show that even in
the full flood of the classical revival oriental literature still had
power to attract. Thomas North's Moral Philosophy of Doni
(1579) was but the first of many English versions. The Latin
and vernacular versions continued to be used for many decades
by writers of novelli and even by dramatists (as, for example, by
Massinger in the third act of The Guardian). Its subsequent
revival, as the Fables of Pilpay, in the French translation (1644)
of the late Persian version known as The Lights of Canopus, is
of special interest, as the first direct contact of Persian literature
with western Europe, and one of the sources of La Fontaine.

Yet another branch of Arabic belles-lettres may have con-
tributed to medieval literature. This was the maqāmāt, the
most elaborate of all Arabic compositions. Though literary
convention demanded that maqāmāt should be written in
rhymed prose and adorned with all manner of philological
 curiosities, the plan or plot of these works was of the simplest.
They consist of a number of disconnected episodes, the hero of
which is always a chevalier d'industrie, a vagabond with a large
repertoire of more or less dishonest tricks for gaining a livelihood,
but who is gifted with a fine literary wit with which he often
expresses the loftiest moral sentiments. To this plan the Spanish
picaros novels offer certain analogies. It may be added that
the maqāmāt found imitators among the Spanish Jews, and that
El Cavallero Cifar, besides showing other oriental affinities,
contains in at least one of the adventures of the Ribaldo—the
first Spanish pícaro—an episode from the purely oriental cycle
which is associated in the Arabic version with the character of
Jubā.' It is possible also that analogies may be found between
episodes in the maqāmāt and early Italian tales of the realist or
picaresque type, but the whole subject remains as yet unex-
plored.

This infiltration of Arabic literary themes into medieval
Europe forms in reality one aspect of a general intellectual move-
ment. Latin civilization was outgrowing the narrow ecclesiastical
disciplines of the Dark Ages; men were becoming curious about
matters which they had hitherto accepted on authority. Unable
to find satisfaction in the narrowness, poverty, and lack of
originality of such Latin literature as they possessed, they were
forced to look elsewhere for what they desired. To the Islamic
world they had hitherto conceded—and that grudgingly—only
a military superiority; now they realized with shame that it was
also their intellectual superior. With the flood-tide of Arabic
science which followed this conviction there was borne a volume
of prose literature, which entered more or less deeply into all
the rising literatures of Europe, and prepared the way for the
intellectual outburst of the Renaissance. Yet the most important
Islamic contribution to the literature of the Middle Ages may
have been rather the influence of Arabic culture and ideas on
both poetry and prose, whether accompanied or not by material
borrowings from Arabic sources. Though this subject strictly

1 Revue Hispanique, x (1923), 91.
falls outside the scope of the present chapter, some mention must be made of the repeated suggestions of recent students, that elements of the Muslim cosmogony and legends of the ascent of Muhammad (some of which may go back to older Persian legend) have entered into the *Divina Commedia* either direct or through earlier western legends, such as the *Legend of Tundal* and *St. Patrick's Purgatory*, as Arabic philosophical ideas and the imagery and eroticism of the Muslim mystics are certainly reflected not only in Dante's works, but also in the leading ideas of the other poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*. The interest with which Arabic studies were pursued in Italy in Dante's time certainly renders the theory by no means improbable, though it cannot yet be held as proved, except on points of detail. But the thought is attractive, if only because the genius of Dante would tower all the higher could it be shown that he fused into one magnificent synthesis not only the great heritage of Christian and classical mysticism, but also the richest and most spiritual features of the religious experience of Islam.

Before leaving the Middle Ages we must return for a moment to Spain and take up again a point already touched on, the continued influence, namely, of Arabic oral tradition and Arabic culture in Andalusia, after the reconquest of the greater part of it by the Christians. This influence, though scarcely lending itself to dogmatic judgements, has none the less a perceptible bearing on Spanish, and, through Spanish, on European literature. Few would deny that something of the warmth and movement, the richer fantasy, which marks the literature of the south is due to the Arabic cultural environment of Andalusia during the early centuries and the impress which that culture left on the Andalusian. It is of course true that during the interval between the conquest of Seville and the fall of Granada the Andalusians were at one with their co-religionists of Castile in language, traditions, and literary style. But when, with the

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1 On this last point see H. J. Chaytor, *The Troubadours* (1910), 106.
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event, but the culminating moment in a long process of artistic idealization, fed by the morisco romances, the beginnings of travel and colonization in the East, the descriptions of Indian and Persian life by Tavernier, Chardin, Bernier, and others, and the illusion of local colour created by the various eastern embassies which from time to time had dazzled Paris with their magnificence. It was all doubtless very superficial, but during those years there was built up that ‘romantic’ image of the East, warm-coloured, exotic, and mysterious, which is still exploited in our own time. The success of the genuinely oriental Arabian Nights was immediate and complete. The imagination of the reading public was fired. Publishers competed for the privilege of ministering to the fashion. The Arabian Nights was followed by the Persian Tales (‘Thousand and One Days’), the old Book of Sindbad came to life again as the Turkish Tales. When the supply of genuine material ran short, industrious writers set to work to supply the deficiency. Guéllutte filled the life of a generation with pseudo-translations, and the genius of Montesquieu created a new form of social criticism in the Lettres persanes.

In England the craze was hardly less. The Arabian Nights, the Persian Tales, the Turkish Tales were translated as soon as they appeared, and went through edition after edition. Numerous imitators learned from Guéllutte’s example how to ‘turn a Persian tale for half-a-crown’. It was a very strange Orient that was reflected in the ‘Oriental’ literature of the eighteenth century, an Orient which the romantic imagination of the time refashioned after its own ideas and peopled with grotesque figures clothed in the garb of caliph, kadi, and jinn. So gross a perversion could not endure. The pseudo-oriental romance wilted under the lash of Hamilton, Pope, and Goldsmith, but not before it had left its mark on literature. In England, fused with the kindred rhythms of the Old Testament, it produced The Vision of Mirza (the spark which first kindled the imagination of Robert Burns) and Rasselas. In France, reverting, by a strange coincidence, to the truly oriental form of apologue, it furnished Voltaire and the reformers with a setting for their political and social satires. And in both France and England it produced one remarkable book, which, by its fusion of ‘Gothic romance’ with oriental subjects and imagery, prefigured and influenced much of the imaginative work of the next half-century, Beckford’s Vathek. More important, however, was its indirect influence, its share in predisposing public taste for the reversion to the non-classical and medieval which goes by the name of the Romantic movement.

But something more is needed to explain the success of the Arabian Nights. The cause is probably to be found in the crisis through which French and English literature was passing, owing to the expansion of the reading classes and the demand for a more popular type of literary production. Classicism, in England at least, had never been really popular, and the ponderous, slow-moving novels of the seventeenth century were not for the people. It was an age of experiment, when writers like Defoe, Steele, and Addison were feeling their way towards a new style. The Arabian Nights, essentially a production of the people, may have lacked all the finer elements of literary art, but it possessed in a superlative degree the one quality, hitherto overlooked by men of letters, but indispensable in a popular literature, the spirit of adventure. It is not over-rash to suggest that it supplied the clue for which the popular writers were searching, and that but for the Nights there would have been no Robinson Crusoe, and perhaps no Gulliver’s Travels.


1 An original for Robinson Crusoe has sometimes been sought in the philosophic romance of Ibn Ṭūfayl called Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, translated into Latin
The lengths to which the vogue for oriental tales was carried in the eighteenth century and the influence which they exerted are matters generally disregarded by our literary historians. The explanation of this neglect is doubtless to be sought in the poor literary quality of the direct imitations in both France and England, a fact which moved Brunetiè to the criticism that contact with the Muslim Orient had enriched only a branch of letters which constituted a national disgrace. But there are other indications of the depth of the impress made by the oriental tale on the mind of the century. To Warton, writing his History of English Poetry in the seventeen-seventies, it seemed self-evident that the romantic movement in the Middle Ages was a purely Arabian product. Exaggerated out of all proportion though Warton's theory may be, its very existence and acceptance throws a strong light on the ideas with which his age was imbued. The same preoccupation can be seen in Southey's choice of subjects for his narrative poems Thalaba and The Curse of Kehama. To the modern critic these may well seem 'remotely and unpopularity conceived', but to a generation reared on Maugrabey the Magician and other oriental fantasies they were no more remote and unpopular than are Ali Baba and Aladdin to the men and women of the twentieth century.

Above all the Arabian Nights remained. There was an element in them that never failed of appeal to the imagination. It was not only their rich colour and exotic setting—that element which has made the fortune of their imitators. For all their magic and mystery they stood on the solid ground of reality; though their characters might be standardized and undeveloped, their adventures were real adventures, told with an instinct for the dramatic. Beneath their fantasy and exotic appeal there was

by Poccok in 1671 under the title of Philosophus Astridactus, of which Ockley issued an English version in 1708. The subject is now being more fully investigated by A. R. Pastor; see his work, The Idea of Robinson Crusoe (Part I, Watford, 1930).

a moral core, without which they could not have entered so deeply into the heart of Europe, nor have preserved for two centuries a place in the affections of both learned and simple. The real East became but the more vivid and its influence the more potent that it was freed from the cumbersome extravagances that had hitherto obscured it.

It must not be forgotten that Europe was still profoundly ignorant of the true literature and thought of the East. A fresh page was turned when in 1774 William Jones issued, 'not as a philologist but a man of taste, not as an interpreter but a poet', his Latin Commentaries on Asiatic Poetry. For the first time it was open to the cultured, classically-educated circles of western Europe to understand and appreciate the qualities of Arabic and Persian poetry. But the weight of tradition lay heavy on the literature of France and England, and it was left for the leaders of the new German movement to grasp their possibilities. They were free agents, the creators, not the servants, of public taste. Moreover the poetry of Persia had already left its mark on German literature. More than a century before, the translations of Sa'di's Gulistan and Bustan made by the traveller and scholar Olearius had 'refreshed and supplied a salutary stimulus to the German literature of that time', and the continued influence of Persian literature is seen, for example, in the Yusuf and Zulaykha story in Grimmelshausen's tale Joseph. On the other hand, the literature of the eighteenth century could not but reflect the current French 'orientalism'. Lessing followed Voltaire in giving an oriental setting to his didactic work, and such early productions of the Romantic school as Oehlenschläger's Ali and Gulaby are typically eighteenth-century fantasies, while his later play Aladdin (1808), in spite of its mixture of Arabian Nights, fairies, elves, and Indian apologues, already shows glimpses of that better apprehension of the East which was eventually to regulate all such things to pantomime.

For this real understanding Germany was indebted to a remarkable line of poet-scholars, who continued the work begun by Sir William Jones. Through Herder's influence the passion for study, which was characteristic of the German romantic movement, extended also to oriental literature and thought. Schlegel and Hammer in the first generation, and Rückert in the second, revealed to the poets and writers of the West new and almost unsuspected treasures. The literature of the East, Indian, Persian, and Arabic, was thus able to enter into nineteenth-century German literature to a degree unparalleled in Europe since the literature of medieval Spain. The first and fairest flower in the western 'Gulistan' was Goethe's Westöstliche Divan. His successors, who read and translated their oriental models for themselves, went farther. Like Rückert, they reproduced and imitated Persian ideas and images, if they did not, like Platen, go the length of using Persian metrical forms. Goethe, on the other hand, found in oriental poetry first of all a means of escape into the world of imagination from the brutal realities of the age. Mere imitation could not satisfy him; rather, by yoking the art and ideals of Persian poetry with those medieval and 'romantic' elements in the European tradition with which they were in closest harmony, he created a new idiom to express his own thought, and at the same time emphasized the cosmopolitanism which it was his aim to impress on German literature.¹

For a time the Persian and Indian fashion held the field. Even Heine, though he did not spare his satire on it, could not keep the oriental note entirely out of his lyrics. But it failed, as it was bound to fail. It was a hothouse plant, and could not take root in European soil without hybridizing. There is much truth in the view that the more deeply impregnated the poet

a real attachment to the East, but their orientalism is too often patently at second-hand. The things of the East, in Brunetière’s phrase, while becoming familiar, did not become ‘interior’.

English literature in the nineteenth century stood substantially on the same footing as that of France. The effect of the new orientalism was more marked, as might have been expected, but the East continued to serve as little more than decorative background, enriched by the romantic insistence on ‘local colour’, a legacy of Scott and the German movement. It was Byron who made this other Orient popular, and its classic example is Moore’s Lalla Rookh. The influence of the Arabian Nights is reduced to a few elements of the frame-story, and the poetical episodes are based on the works of Jones, d’Herbelot, and other orientalists. In order to saturate his imagination with eastern ideas and imagery, Moore secluded himself for two years, but despite his own satisfaction with the result, his poem merely transports the accents of Scott from his native land to India. For the rest, the place of orientalism in the greater poets is negligible; Sobrab and Rustum, Fereishteh’s Fancies, and the like, have little of the East in them but the name. In prose literature Shagrat stands alone in dependence upon Arabian models.

The solution of the paradox, then, is that, where the Muslim East was concerned, preoccupation with the romantic scene of their own imagining distracted the poets and writers of England and France from the reality behind the mask which served them so well. The East was treated as a mere colour-scheme, and its claim to have contributed to the spiritual heritage of mankind impatiently waved aside. Long ago Sir William Jones observed that no appreciation of Asiatic poetry was possible without a scholarly knowledge of the peoples and natural history of Asia.

1 ‘Although I have never been in the East myself, yet every one who has been there declares that nothing can be more perfect than my representations of it, its people, and life, in “Lalla Rookh”.’
So long as this indispensable knowledge was confined to a few savants and civil servants, any productive influence of oriental literature and thought upon Europe was out of the question. Those who understood the East best, and who portrayed it, like Gobineau and Morier, with a certain ironic sympathy, doubtless owed something to oriental literature as well as to oriental life, but it is a debt not easily estimated.

Yet even the nineteenth century was not to be left without a witness to the essential kinship of East and West. Just as an Englishman created in *Vathek* the synthesis of the oriental and the Gothic tale, so now another Englishman was to demonstrate the power of an eastern poet to penetrate to the heart of western poetry. Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam* is at once truly Persian and truly English, not a translation, but a re-creation. If the mood expressed in the famous quatrains is not of the most heroic or exalted, none the less they caught the exact tone of the age, and voiced it as perfectly as eight centuries earlier they had voiced the polished hedonism of the cultured society of Ispahan.

On looking back over the field of European literature, the influence of the literatures of the Muslim East seems at first confined to a narrow and unproductive strip. Only when it is realized that the East has acted like a leaven on the spirit is it seen to possess a far wider importance. At three different periods, if our view is correct, it has reacted on western literature with results identical in nature, though not in degree. On each occasion its function has been to liberate the imagination from a narrow and oppressive discipline, to make the first breach in the wall of convention. It is in its power of calling into action creative impulses hitherto dormant or impotent that eastern literature has laid the West under its debt. The movement once started has gathered momentum from its own internal resources, and such oriental elements as have been absorbed are so blended with native elements that in the finished development they are often difficult to recognize. In so far as the East has supplied models for European literature it has played a subordinate part. In the Middle Ages, when there was a substantial identity of intellectual method between the civilization of Islam and Christendom, imitation on the part of the latter may well have been fruitful; after the Renaissance it could produce at best only harmless curiosities. For the same reason the result on medieval thought of contact with oriental literature was immeasurably greater than the result of later contacts.

Following on these three moments of casual contact, the German romantics turned again to the East, and for the first time made it their conscious aim to open a way for the real heritage of oriental poetry to enter into the poetry of Europe. The nineteenth century, with its new sense of power and superiority, seemed to clang the gate decisively in the face of their design. To-day, on the other hand, there are signs of a change. Oriental literature has begun to be studied again for its own sake, and a new understanding of the East is being gained. As this knowledge spreads and the East recovers its rightful place in the life of humanity, oriental literature may once again perform its historic function, and assist us to liberate ourselves from the narrow and oppressive conceptions which would limit all that is significant in literature, thought, and history, to our own small segment of the globe.

H. A. R. Gibb.