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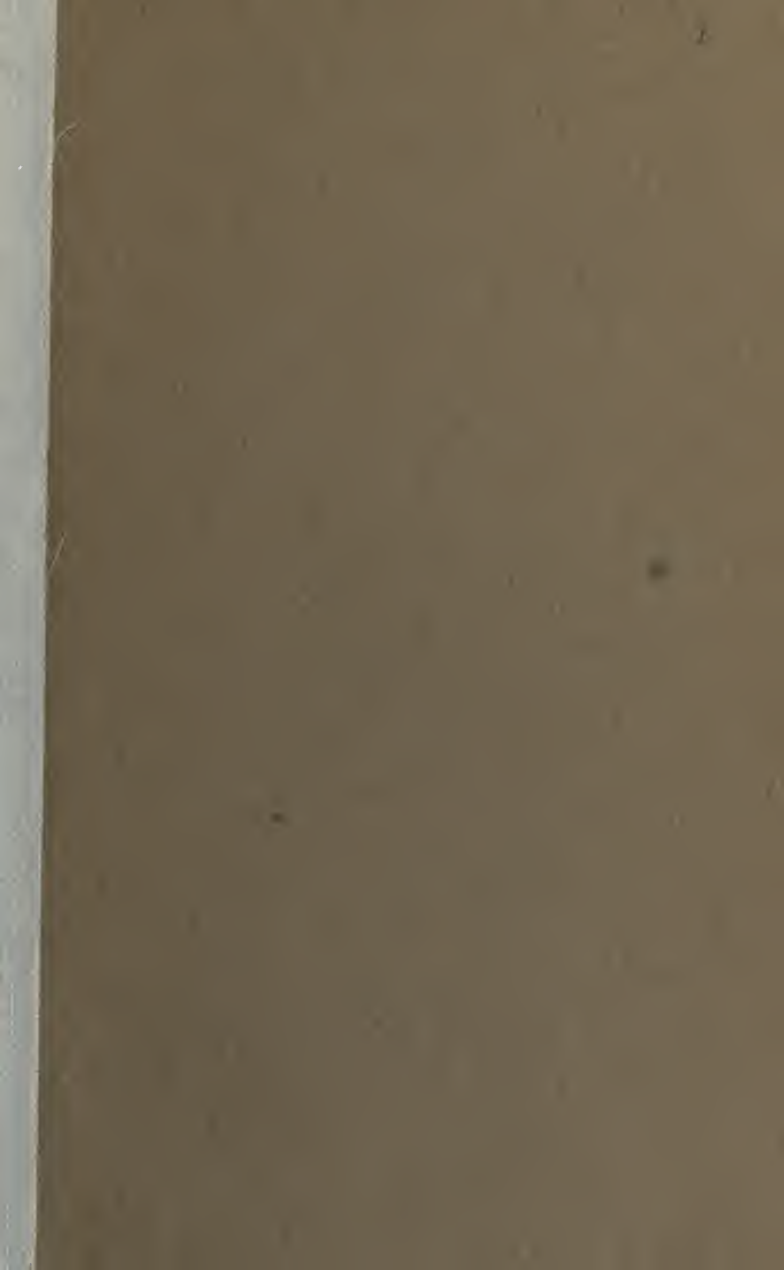
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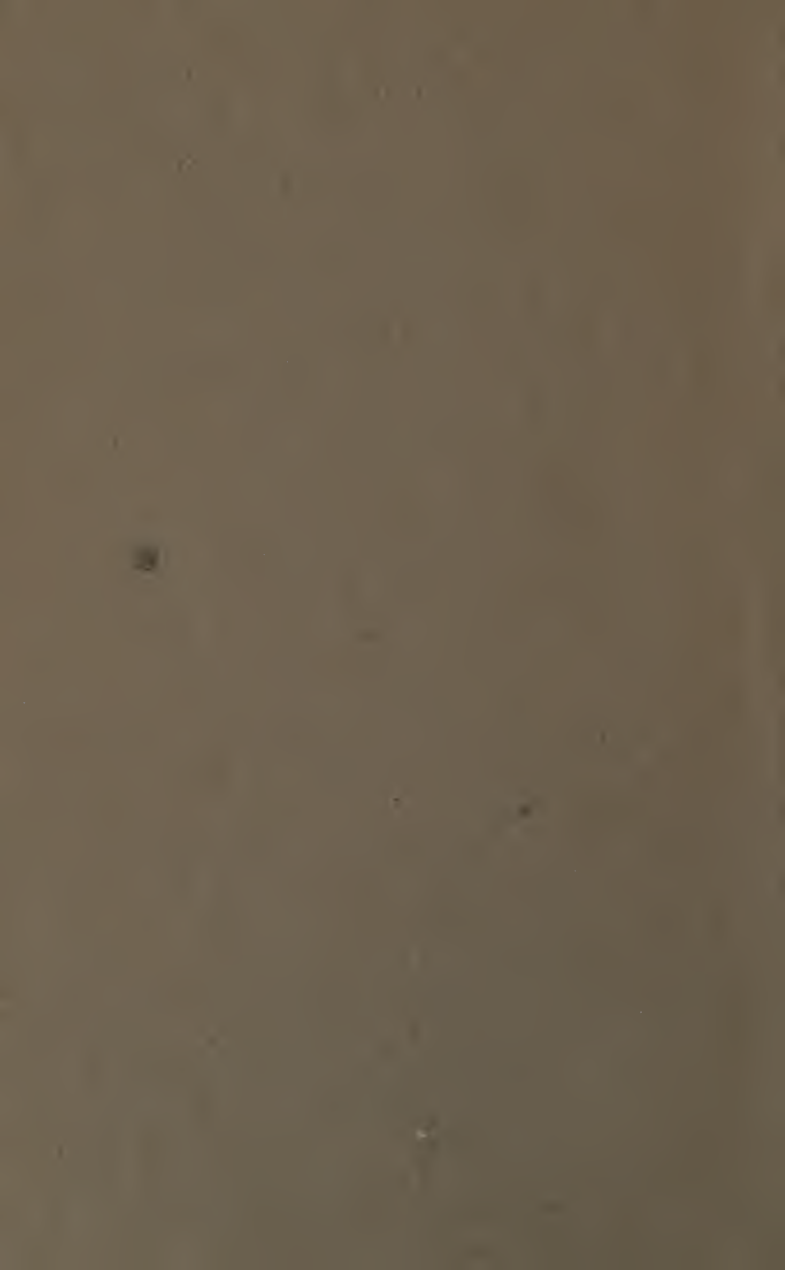


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GERMANY'S LITERARY  
DEBT TO FRANCE.



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# GERMANY'S LITERARY DEBT TO FRANCE.

BY  
JESSIE L. WESTON.

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## Germany's Literary Debt to France.

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ONE of the most remarkable, and indeed, unparalleled, features in this present lamentable war has been the clamorous, and insistent assertion on the part of Germany of her possession of a culture, of a national development, at once moral, literary, and scientific, so superior to that of other nations that she is justified in endeavouring by force of arms to impose this "culture" upon the rest of Europe.

I am aware that an attempt has been made (with a view to lessen the monstrous absurdity of this claim) to distinguish *Kultur* as made, and spelt, in Germany, from our usual conception of the term, but the Germans themselves know no such distinction. I was in Germany at the outbreak of the war, and when England finally declared herself upon the side of France and Russia it was pointed out to me what a sin we, as a folk akin to the Germans, sharing the same "kultur" (*Wir sind zwei Kultur-Volk* I was reminded) the same traditions, the

same literature (!), were committing in ranging ourselves on the side of a barbarous people like the Russians.

It is a proverbial saying that "The world takes you at your own valuation," and Germany's vociferous iterations of her culture claims seem to have exercised a mesmeric effect upon some minds; there were certain English professors who did not hesitate to sign a protest against war with a country to which we owed so deep an intellectual debt. It has probably not yet dawned upon these serious, and unimaginative, gentlemen that the principle enunciated was capable of another and wider application.

No such protest came from French scholars; not that they are, as a body, less "cultured" than their English confrères; not that they are less ready to acknowledge the value of work done in other lands, probably no body of men is so free from a taint of false nationalism, or so ready to accept good work on its own merit, no matter who may be the author, but precisely because, possessed of a keener critical faculty, they have a juster appreciation of the real value of German research. I suspect also that, being gifted with a lively sense of humour, the extravagant claims of Germany have served

to cast a gleam of amusement athwart the blackness of the War cloud.

Why, indeed, should France trouble to dispute the claims of a culture based upon a borrowed foundation, the materials for which were a loan from her?

It is an old story now, and what Germany has contrived to forget. England, for the most part, never knew, but France remembers—and smiles.

It was towards the latter part of the twelfth century, under the influence of chivalry, an institution which, as all the world knows, owes its development, as it does its name, to the French culture whose wide-spread and beneficent effects the Middle Ages, at least, did not disdain to admit, that Germany first possessed a conscious literature. Previous to that date we have only such fragments as the *Hildebrands-Lied*, the *Waltharius*, and sundry Prayers, and Spells, such as form the earliest remains of all literatures. Man at first takes more interest in his relation to the unseen Powers which can help, or harm, him, than he does in his dealings with his fellow men. Also, till the influence of chivalry and *courtoisie* had created a "milieu" for the enjoyment of literature, literature could not

exist, the demand creates the supply. But in extraordinary and startling contrast to the paucity of literary monuments previous to this period, is the number and high quality of the works, the composition of which falls within certain well-defined dates. A German writer describes the age as one which displays "a high degree of æsthetic culture, such as was not attained again till 600 years later." It is denied by no literary critic, German, or other, that with the death of the Landgrave Hermann of Thuringia, in the early part of the 13th century, the golden age of German literature closed, it relapsed into a mediocrity from which it was only rescued by the intelligent patronage of German princes in the 18th century.

How is such a phenomenon to be accounted for ?

If we examine the works of the period, and find that their inspiration came *from the outside*, we are, I think, driven to the conclusion that this people which now makes such overwhelming claims upon our admiration, was, in reality, singularly deficient in original inspiration, or power of independent construction, but was dependent upon foreign inspiration, and foreign models, to a degree unknown in any other literature.

That this is no prejudiced assertion, but a simple, and moderate, statement of fact, will be apparent if we examine the "provenance" of those works which, by universal consent, rank as the classics of Mediæval German Literature.

Heinrich v. Veldeke, who is termed by modern Germans "the father of artistic chivalric poetry," admittedly grew up "in an environment especially strongly influenced by French culture" (I am quoting throughout from the standard German literary text-books). His first successful work, *The Aeneid*, was inspired, "not by Virgil, but by a French poem," probably Benoit de Saint Maur's *Roman d'Aeneas*. The success of the poem was so great that, at the request of the Landgrave Hermann, above referred to, Herbot v. Fritslar undertook the translation of the earlier period of the Trojan War, by rendering into German verse Benoit's *Roman de Troie*.

It is worthy of note here that, while the German writers simply translated French into German verse, the French author drew his material from an interpolation in the Latin of Cornelius Nepos, expanding the bare incidents of the original recital into romantic French

verse. Thus, alike in classical knowledge, and inventive faculty, the French writer had the advantage.

That he also possessed the advantage of a higher standard of conduct and manners is evident from a remark in Paul's *Grundriss der Germanischen Philologie*, where the writer admits that where v. Fritslar departed from his model by introducing realistic descriptions, he oversteps the bounds "not merely of courtly convention, but of good taste."

A much more famous writer than v. Fritslar, or even than v. Veldeke, was Hartmann v. Aue, whose work is referred to in eulogistic terms by contemporary, and following, German writers. Of the four romantic poems we possess from his pen, three are certainly translations from the French; *Erec*, and *Iwein*, are versions of romances of the same name by the famous French poet, Chrétien de Troyes; *Gregorius* is also taken from the French of an unknown writer. The fourth poem, *Der arme Heinrich*, is a version of a tale found in the *Legenda Aurea*, but we do not know Hartmann's direct source. The *Lanzelet* of Ulrich v. Zatzikhoven, a poem interesting rather on account of its subject-matter than its literary merit—it contains a version of the Lancelot story earlier

than any other which we now possess—was derived from a French book in the possession of Hugo de Morville, one of the hostages who replaced Richard Cœur de Lion in his German prison in 1194. It is quite possible that this poem may have been the original *Lancelot* of Walter Map, and that in this, as in other, cases, the German source, written in French, was composed in England.

The *Diû Krône* of Heinrich v. dem Türlin, again, a long rambling compilation of tales centring round Gawain, has an unknown French source, the writer professes to be following Chrétien de Troyes, but he has borrowed little from that writer.

The *Wigalois* of Wirnt v. Gravenburg, again, is a free rendering of the *Bel Inconnu* of Renaud de Beaujeu, known to the German author by oral transmission.

Even the two greatest poets, and most original minds of the period, Wolfram v. Eschenbach, and Gottfried v. Strassburg, owe their fame to translations from the French. The exact source of Wolfram's *Parzival* has not been definitely determined, but whether that source was by Chrétien de Troyes, or by Guiot, le Provençal, (as Wolfram himself asserts) there can be no doubt as to the

language of the original. The hero is Angevin on the father's side, Galois, (Welsh) on that of the mother—he is no German! Indeed, the obvious aim of the writer is the glorification of the house of Anjou!

Nor is the case otherwise with Wolfram's later work, *Willehalm*, which is derived from the well-known Chanson de Geste, *Aliscans*.

The connection of the Swan-Knight story with the Grail theme, a connection which has become familiar to modern music lovers through Wagner's *Lohengrin*, is not, as has been supposed, Wolfram's invention, but is found in two French versions. The earliest literary treatment of the Swan-Knight theme is the *Chevalier au Cygne*, of an unknown French writer, and the legend is frequently referred to in the 12th century in connection with Godefroi de Bouillon, the conqueror of the Holy Sepulchre, who was traditionally supposed to be the lineal descendant of the mysterious knight. The German *Lohengrin* is a late version, based upon the poem of Wolfram, and the original Swan-Knight tale. The original is to be located on the Lower (Dutch) rather than on the Upper (German) Rhine.

Perhaps the most brilliant name in this long



list of German poets who drew their material from French sources, is that of Gottfried v. Strassburg, whose *Tristan und Isolde* is a translation of the *Tristan* of Thomas of Brittany. Here, as in the case of Wolfram, we have the work of a genuine poet translated by a poet, and the result is a monument of literature.

Gottfried was a master of literary style, and his poem is certainly the most artistic version of the *Tristan* story now extant.

The work of Eilhart v. Oberge, who drew from the same source as the fragments by Bérol, is much inferior in literary merit to that of Gottfried, but is equally dependent upon a French original.

So far were the German writers of the day from considering such dependence a thing to be denied, or ignored, that they asserted it in cases where there is reason to believe the attribution to be fictitious. Thus Stricker in his *Daniel*, a confused medley of knightly adventures, belonging to the decadent period of chivalric romance, claims as his authority Alberic de Besançon, the author of a poem dealing with Charlemagne, of which only a fragment has been preserved. Alberic lived at the very beginning of the 12th

century, before the Arthurian legend had been adopted as a popular literary theme, and such a work as the *Daniel* cannot possibly be from his pen.

When we turn from the great romantic works of the Classical period to the lyrical poetry we are still confronted with evidence of French influence. Lyric verse, which is primarily the expression of personal feeling and sentiment, is naturally, and inevitably, marked by the individuality of the writer in a degree absent from epic, or narrative, poetry, the effect of foreign influence is more general, there is less direct borrowing. But that the famous German *Minnesänger* belong to the same family as the French, or more correctly speaking Provençal, Troubadours, and owed their initial impulse to that specific relation of the poet to the lady he served which was a development of the chivalric tradition, is undoubted. To quote Gröber (*Grundriss der Romanischen Philologie*)—"Even as the institution of knighthood took, not only very early, but very deep, root in the south of France, so also was the art of Lyrical Poetry cultivated with a specially loving care. As the other nations of the West adopted the institution of knighthood as their own, so, at

the same time, they took over this special form of chivalric activity, and that in practically the same shape as it had assumed in its original home."

In fact we have certain instances of not merely an imitation of form, as in the case of the *Tage*, or *Wachter*, *Lieder*, which are derived from the French *Aubade*, but of actual borrowing of content.

No serious writer on the subject can have any desire to minimize the value of Mediæval German poetry, certain of the writers, such as Wolfram v. Eschenbach, Walther v. der Vögelweide, and Gottfried v. Strassburg, belong by universal consent to the first rank of Mediæval poets, but this does not alter the fact that so far as form and subject-matter are concerned they are followers, not initiators. The French were the pioneers alike in social organisation and literary development.

German critics to-day, must, perforce, own this, but they endeavour to nullify the effect of their admission by claiming that "while mediæval knighthood owed its formal development to the French that development, in Germany, received a special impress from the deeper national character, and specially Germanic conception of Loyalty, Chastity, and

Honour." If this were indeed the case we might well cry to-day, "*Quantum mutatum ab illo!*" I suspect, however, that quite as much is due to the French preference for keeping different styles of literary composition apart, and treating a tale as a tale, while the Germans have an inherent fondness for the *Tendenz-Schrift*.

As undeniable as the fact of their initial debt to France is the fact that with the death of the princely patron Hermann of Thuringia, German literature fell from its high estate, and only regained an analogous position under similar courtly encouragement in the 18th century. Nor can we forget that when the prince who must be considered as the founder of modern Germany, Frederick the Great, of Prussia, desired to introduce literary culture into his kingdom, it was again to France, in the person of Voltaire, that he turned.

The whole literary history of Germany is exceedingly curious, no other country presents a similar problem; with France and England, for instance, the process of evolution is continuous, some periods are more prolific than others but there is no hiatus. With Germany we have a period of spasmodic brilliance and then silence. Some may, of course, point to the

wars and divisions of mediæval Germany as affording adequate explanation of this lack of literary activity, but the argument will not hold good; it was precisely when their respective countries were torn by conflict, and seething with internal dissension, that Dante and Langland produced the *Divina Commedia*, and *Piers Plowman*, two of the most individual, and characteristic, works in all literature. No, the German is not a spontaneous creator; he requires, in the first instance, encouragement and direction from above; in the second, his "forte" lies rather in annexation than in invention.

But is there not something humorous in the fact that it was precisely to a body of literature essentially foreign in origin and inspiration that Wagner turned for the material upon which to build up his National Drama?

There is no doubt that to his fellow countrymen to-day the heroes of the Wagner drama are one and all *echt Deutsch*. I have, on many occasions, derived extreme amusement from the perusal of articles in the German papers fulminating against the iniquity of entrusting such rôles as *Tristan* and *Parsifal* (both of whom were, of course, Celts), to other than

German artists! Or when I have read of the impossibility of a Dane, and a Swede, adequately representing Siegfried and Brünnhilde--whose original home was not on the banks of the Rhine (as in the *Nibelungen-lied*) but in the far Scandinavian North of the *Volsunga-saga*. It was even more delightful when an enthusiastic German lady informed me solemnly that a certain famous Belgian tenor, not being a German, was quite unacceptable as Lohengrin. He hailed from the very home of the Swan-Knight! No, the modern German has certainly no sense of humour; and as a Culture-hero I hold him to be sadly out of place.

In all seriousness, if an appeal based on our supposed intellectual debt to Germany could fairly be addressed to the English public, before provoking a war with France might not a similar appeal, and that with tenfold more reason, have been made by German professors to their own countrymen? There can be no doubt of the immense debt which civilization in general owes to France; Germany's share of that debt is no small one.

Personally, I am sceptical as to the indebtedness of modern England to modern Germany; that individual scholars may have

ground for gratitude I can understand, although, so far as my own branch of research is concerned, I have always combatted, and shall continue to combat, the undue value placed upon the results of German research. I believe English scholars are too prone to undervalue their own achievements, and to not merely overvalue, but to make an actual *Fetich* of German scholarship.

But even if modern civilization has owed, in the past, a debt to Germany, she herself has liquidated that debt in blood and fire—you cannot murder your debtor and expect to receive payment from the corpse!

An article contributed by the famous German chemist, Professor Ostwald, to the Swedish paper *Dagen* casts a lurid light upon the present situation.

The learned Professor asserts that German militarism is simply an expression of the organizing genius of the German nation, by means of which it has reached a higher stage of civilization than that attained by other nations. "The French and English have reached that stage of cultured development we ourselves left over fifty years ago. That stage was the one of Individualism. But above this stage is found the stage of Organization, and that is

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what Germany has attained to-day. You ask me what Germany wants? Well, Germany wishes to organize Europe because up till now Europe has never been organized."

Professor Ostwald may be theoretically right, and collective Organization may be a higher stage of civilization than Individualism, but each stage must complete its own process of evolution before it can pass to a higher. Before the individual is fit for organization he must be truly civilized, that is, he must be master of *himself*, of his desires, his passions, his appetites, or else the imposition of a strict external discipline only makes him a slave. Also, while respecting himself as a man, he must understand the claims to respect of others.

The organization of civilized men, for purposes of civilization, may be a benefit to mankind; the organization of masses of imperfectly civilized units, subject only to discipline from the outside, and possessing no inner rule of conduct, and that for purposes of aggression, is, on the contrary, the most appalling danger which civilization has ever been called upon to face.

JESSIE L. WESTON.





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