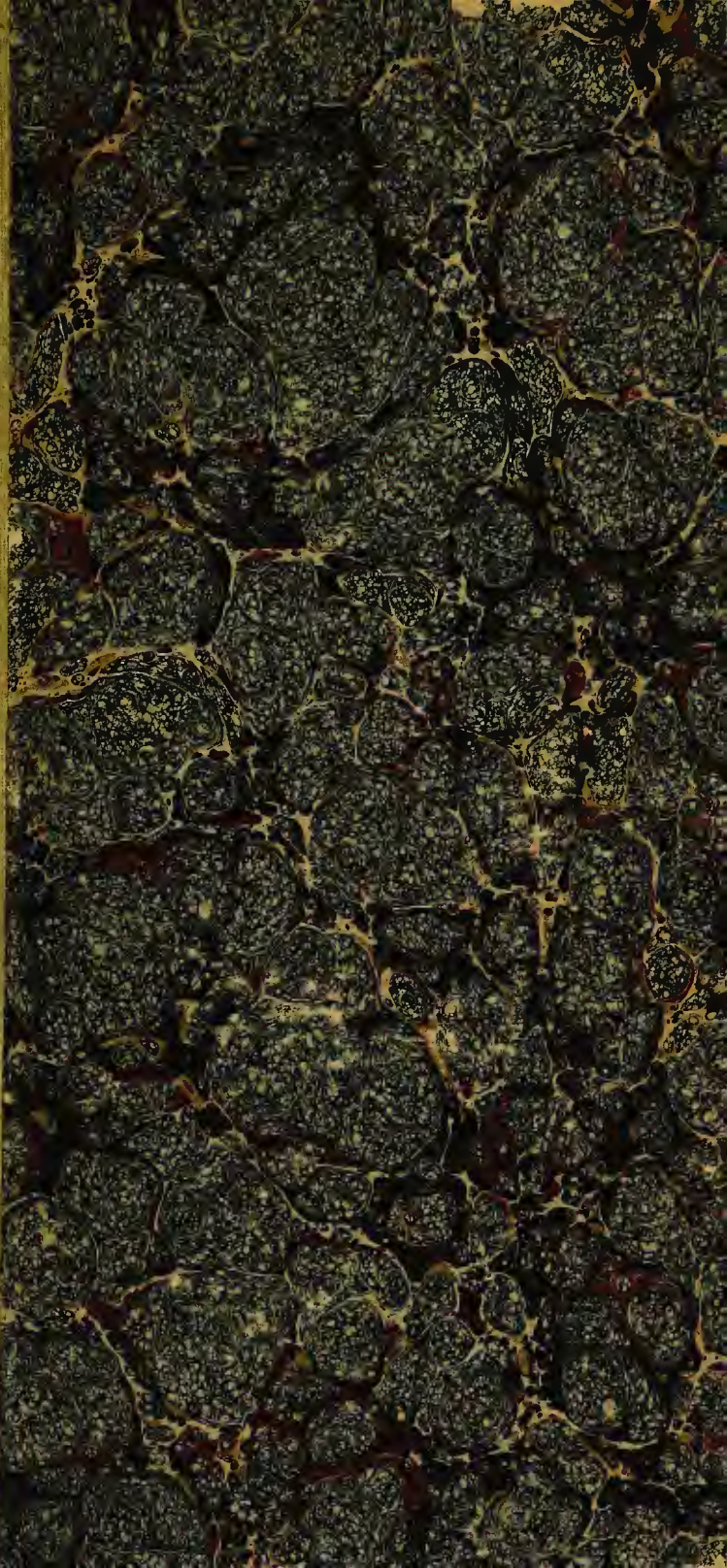
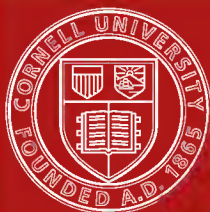


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# MODERN IDEAS

IN THE

## MIDDLE AGES.

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Modern ideas in the Middle Ages.



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BY

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ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF GERMAN IN HARVARD UNIVERSITY, CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

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Reprinted from the *Publications* of the MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA,  
Supplement to Vol. v, No. 2, 1890.



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*Modern Ideas in the Middle Ages.*

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The didactic poetry of the Middle Ages, devoid as it largely is of romantic charm and artistic beauty, presents, nevertheless, a phenomenon of no little interest to the historical student. The growth of this species of literature is simultaneous with the decay of chivalric poetry, and it is one of the first manifestations of that commercial spirit which, together with the failure of the Crusades and the break down of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, marks the thirteenth century as one of the great turning epochs in European history. Three features of the didactic poetry are especially significant in this respect. First, what may be called the democratic attitude of the didactic writers. As a rule,<sup>1</sup> they detest war, they abhor the unproductive life and the shallow amusements of the nobility, they extol the honesty and industry of the peaceful citizen; and if few of them go so far as to say with HUGO VON TRIMBERG, that true love of mankind could be found only with the lower classes, since they alone were capable of self sacrifice, yet it is an adequate expression of the prevailing sentiment of his fellow writers when the sturdy ULRIC BONER says that a poor freeman is richer than a rich man in dependence.

Vriheit zieret allez leben,  
Unt kan wol guot gemüete geben;  
Vriheit hoehet wip unt man,  
Den armen sie rich machen kan;  
Vriheit ist der éren hort,  
Si überkroenet werk unt wort.

A second trait which these writers, be they German, French or English, have in common, is the opposition against the church of Rome. Hardly a more drastic word has been spoken in Germany before the times of HUSS and LUTHER about the policy of the Holy See than that famous passage in FREIDANK'S 'Bescheidenheit' where the author speaks of the double dignity

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<sup>1</sup> DER WINSBEKE and FREIDANK are the most notable exceptions of this rule.

of St. Peter as fisherman and as shepherd. St. Peter's net was destined for the fishing of men, the pope catches silver and gold, castles and countries instead; St. Peter was ordained a shepherd in order to guide and watch over his flock, not, as the Pope does, to shear God's sheep or even to kill them. In France the horrors of the Albigensic wars find an echo among others in the bitter invectives of GUIOT DE PROVINS, inserted in his great satirical review of the social organism of his time. And in England the great trio of GOWER, CHAUCER and LANGLAND needs only to be mentioned to remind one that here also the spirit of the reformation found a literary expression long before the reformation itself, in the didactic poetry of the middle classes.

Finally, it is in this poetry that we first notice a decided influence of classic models upon the literature of modern nations. FELIPPO VILLANI in his 'Liber de civitatis Florentiae famosis civibus' counts it among the greatest achievements of DANTE that he "first of all united the fanciful creations of the ancient poets with the belief of the christian religion and showed that those ancients not less than we were filled with the Holy Spirit." This "first of all" is not quite correct. Not DANTE, but the didactic poets that preceded him, have a claim to be called the first forerunners of humanism. The 'Welsche Gast' of THOMASIN VON ZIRCLARIA as well as HUGO VON TRIMBERG'S 'Renner,' and above all the most famous of all the didactic poems of the Middle Ages, the 'Roman de la Rose,' are saturated with Greek and Roman traditions, conceptions and expressions. And although these classic allusions and figures as a rule betray as little of the classic spirit as PERUGINO'S famous frescoes in the exchange of Perugia betray any resemblance to the ancient heroes and sages which they were meant to represent, yet the fact remains that in this respect also the didactic poets of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were on the side of those ideas and forces which in the end were bound to overthrow the aristocratic hierarchy of papacy and empire.

It is curious that, although considerable attention has been given to this branch of mediæval literature, this attention should have been almost wholly confined to works in the vernacular. And yet the latin didactic poems of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are not only numerous and bulky; but, since a good many of them were written before the greater part of didactic



works in the vernacular, they are also not infrequently valuable as furnishing the source of the latter,<sup>2</sup> and moreover they give us an additional and most conclusive evidence that the most educated part at least of the clergy (the only class of people to whom Latin was accessible at that time) were siding with the friends of reform and progress.

It is on this background that rest three remarkable productions which through a strange mishap seem to have escaped the notice of the historians of literature: the 'Palponista' of BERNHARD VON GEST, the 'Brunellus' of NIGEL WIREKER, and the 'Architrenius' of JEAN DE ANVILLE.

The first of these poems, the author of which was living as a canon at Münster, Westphalia, in the beginning of the thirteenth century, is so completely forgotten that not even a mention of it is made in any history of German literature, and there exists no edition of it later than the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> And yet, few productions of the Middle Ages reveal such a thoroughly democratic spirit, few give us a more vivid and realistic picture of the life of the time, in castle and town, in tavern and market-place. And it is especially interesting as one of the earliest expressions of that hatred and contempt for the follies and sins of the ruling aristocracy which a hundred years later was fanned into the violent outbursts of the Jacqueries and Wat Tyler's rebellion in France and England, and of the guild revolutions in Germany. The author represents himself as enjoying the quiet retreat of his garden, far removed from the busy world, when an old adventurer with gray hair and a weather-beaten face accosts him and asks why he is so averse to the life of a courtier. To him, the adventurer, it seemed the very best of lives. Old as he was, at the nod of his master he would do anything, endure cold and heat, play the juggler or the clown, the soldier or the servant—not, as he expressly states, out of any attachment for his master, but simply for the sake of a rich reward. The canon is of course indignant over this mercenary talk, but the courtier goes on and reveals himself still more unmistakably. The court, he says, knows neither of heaven nor hell; therefore you must look out and get what you can for yourself. Some of the tricks by

<sup>2</sup> Thus the character of Genius in the 'Roman de la Rose' is taken from ALAIN DE L'ISLE's 'De Placitu Naturae.'

<sup>3</sup> Some information about the author and the editions of the "Palponista" I have given in 'Zur Geschichte der lat. Schulpoesie des 12ten u. 13ten Jahrhunderts.' München, 1879.

which you can cheat your master, I will tell you. Of course your master is stupid and very proud of his family. That you must make use of. You tell him for instance: "I know count so and so, your cousin. That is a man! a wolf in battle, a lamb in peace, and how munificent! The other day he presented with most luxurious garments and with rich donations in land five hundred knights who had done some fighting for him. Frequently he speaks of you and wishes you well; truly, you would delight him and his wife highly, if you sent them a little present, even if it were only a falcon or a hawk." Now, of course, this is all lies, and the truth is that this affectionate cousin of your master's hates him to such a degree that it gives him the qualms to hear his name. . . Then you must not forget to praise the outward appearance of your master. If he is short, then you say: "A heavy body makes one slow, a light one favors quickness of mind." If he is tall, then you say: "Only such a body is fitting for a ruler, ridiculous would be a short-legged knight." Is he thin, then you observe that only thin people live long, whereas stout ones are apt to die suddenly. Is he stout, then you comfort him by saying: "What benefit do thin people derive from all their eating? you certainly show that you have lived to some purpose"!—But the best way to insinuate yourself into your master's esteem is to help him out of his debts, and the best way to accomplish this is to find out an opportunity for him to extort money from his subjects. For instance, a row has taken place in the town. There, as you know, all sorts of people come together; rich and poor, foreigner and citizen, master and servant will drink there together in the same inn. At first a quiet conversation is carried on about affairs of war and peace, about the quality of the wine, about the character of the prince and so forth; gradually, as the tongues become heavier, the scene becomes livelier and the talk more heated. A rundown merchant tells in a bragging way of his former travels on land and sea. "At that time, he says, my vessel was heavy with precious ware; nowadays the grocer, who hasn't ever ventured more than a hundred yards outside of the city walls, thinks himself my equal, nowadays the cobbler and the weaver drinks his wine, walks about in scarlet, and rides on horseback and would refuse my daughter even if I gave him a lump of silver into the bargain." Such talk of course is irritating to the common people and one of the crowd gives it to the merchant.

“You miserable braggart, what’s the use of all this high-flown rodomontade. After all your boasted adventures on land and sea, what has become of you? A good for nothing wretch. And that is because you always have been cheating and always will cheat.” This is too much for the merchant. He pours his wine into the face of his defamer and lets his bumper land on his skull. Now a general fight ensues, with fists, boots, candlesticks, chairs they belabor each other, and there is a good deal of blood and many bruises. Finally, they get tired and calm down, they ask for more wine and drink cordially in honor of the reconciliation. “Only, they say to each other, let us keep this quarrel quiet, lest our master, the count, hear about it and call us to account.” But you have been on the lookout for such a thing and you report it as quick as you can to the count and tell him that this is a splendid opportunity to make the people bleed. “For the more you trim the tree, the better it grows; and the more you fleece the common people the better do they work.”

Somewhat more attention has been given of late to the second of the above-mentioned poems, the ‘Brunellus’ of NIGEL WIREKER, an English Benedictin monk of the end of the twelfth century. TH. WRIGHT has inserted it in his ‘Satirical Poets of the Twelfth Century,’ and Prof. MORLEY devotes some pages in his ‘English Writers’ to an analysis of it. Yet no one, as far as I know, has pointed out that in this grotesque composition we have a most striking mockery of the whole scholastic life, a fanciful play of irony with what to most of the poet’s contemporaries must have appeared as the very foundations of society. The hero of the poem is an ass, named Brunellus, who is very much grieved to have such a short tail. He, therefore, asks the wise Galienus (Galenus) to procure him a new one by performing an operation. Galienus tries to dissuade him, but when he finds that the ass has set his mind on it, he apparently consents to his plan. “Go to Salerno,” he says, “and buy there the following medicines: Marblefat, some goosemilk, some snail-swiftness and wolfsfear, a pound of peacocksong, fresh-fallen snow from St. John’s night. All this do well up in boxes and then come back to me. May water and thistles be plentiful on your journey, may hail, snow and rain protect you, and may your friend the bulldog accompany you everywhere. Goodbye.” Gratefully and contentedly poor Brunellus trots

off, but soon a dog proves indeed fatal to him. For while one day he is passing a Cistercian monastery near Lyons, he is attacked by the watchdogs, and when they let him loose the unfortunate tail is entirely gone. Now from sheer despair the ass resolves to study theology and law. He goes to Paris and stays there seven years. But at the end of this time he has not even yet learned to pronounce the name of Paris. Finally he decides to become a monk; but as he cannot find an order which altogether suits him, he is going to found a new one himself, which is to be a caricature of all the existing ones. From the Templars he is going to adopt the preference for fine horses, from the Hospital brothers the practice of lying, from the *Cluniacenses* the permission to eat fat on Fridays, from the Carthusians the scarcity of masses, from the secular canons the concubines, from the *Premonstratenses* the soft tunic, and so forth. While the ass is still dwelling on these reformatory plans, his old master appears and drives him back to his work in the mill.

Although it seems strange that two poems of such marked individuality, as the 'Palponista' and the 'Brunellus,' should have attracted so little attention, yet it is much more curious that the same fate has befallen a work for which it is not claiming too much to characterize it as a forerunner of BUNYAN'S 'Pilgrim's Progress.' And it is hard to see why its author, JEAN DE ANVILLE (or Hauteville), a Cistercian monk of Norman descent who lived at or near Rouen towards the end of the twelfth century, should have been deprived thus far of a place in the history of French literature. It is an epic poem in nine cantos, entitled 'Architrenius,' and written in that turgid and pompous Latin which was the bane of all mediæval imitators of VIRGIL and LUCAN. The following abstract is made from several manuscripts of the work at Rome and Perugia, which I compared,<sup>4</sup> and from TH. WRIGHT'S edition in his 'Satirical Poets.' Architrenius or Archweeper,—this is the name of the hero as well as the title of the book,—having just reached his full manhood, sets himself to thinking how he has employed his life so far and what he has accomplished. To his grief he finds that he has not been one day without guilt, and the tormenting question forces itself upon him whether nature has condemned man from the outset to a sinful existence, whether there is no rescue from

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Forschungen zur deutschen Geschichte* xx, pp. 475-502, and *American Journal of Philology*, vol. xi, pp. 80-87.

the curse of evil. To put an end to his doubts, he resolves to go in search of Nature herself, to inquire for the reason of her wrath, and as a loving son to appeal to her motherly heart. So he sets out on his journey and wanders all over the world, through deserts and dense forests, over rocky mountains and through lonely valleys, until at last he gets to the golden house of Venus, situated on a high summit. The goddess herself, who barbarously enough is described as sitting with a torch and a fishing rod in her hands, does not seem to attract the attention of Architrenius very strongly; all the more however he is impressed with the charms of one of the girls who sit in a circle around her. To an analysis of her beauty and to the description of Cupid who from a slope near by is sending his arrows upon this company, is given the rest of the first and a part of the second canto; and although this passage is entirely without poetical value, it gives us interesting information about the costume of fashionable young people in the twelfth century. Especially Cupid with his long pointed shoes, with his wide, luxurious pantaloons (*ritu Teutonico* as is added), with his slit sleeves, his bracelets, and his diadem is unmistakably represented as a chevalresque young courtier. Architrenius seems a good deal affected by the presence of Cupid, and it takes all his resolution to tear himself away from this scene, but at last he recalls the purpose of his journey and takes it up again. Next he comes to an inn where a crowd of young fellows indulge in noisy carousing. It is a scene that reminds one of the *Carmina burana* and other songs of the *vagantes*, that shifting class of traveling students among whom the famous

Mihi est propositum  
In taberna mori

first originated. 'Wesheil,' 'wesheil,' it sounds from all sides in the student slang of the time, and a song in honor of Bacchus gives expression to the general feeling.

Bacche corymbiferis Phrygiae spectabilis aris  
Quem Iove majorem Thebae venerantur alumnum  
Parnasusque deum, cunctis deus inclyte terris,  
Quam bonus es! meliusque sapis, plus sole sereni,  
Plus splendoris habes auro, Phoeboque nitoris, etc.

This time Architrenius remains entirely faithful to his purpose, and while continuing his pilgrimage, he bewails the dissipation and gluttony of the young men, declaims against man's desires

as the disfigurers of all pure nature and beauty, and praises the sobriety of the Cistercians, the moderation of the Roman Fabricius, and the frugal table of Philemon and Baucis. At the end of the second canto he arrives at Paris, and the whole following canto is devoted to a most vivid description of the miserable life which the poor scholastics led there. Paris itself, to be sure, must have possessed even at that time a charm of its own. Architrenius calls it "*altera regia Phoebii*," "*mundi rosa*," "*bal-samus orbis*"; and he extols highly its beautiful surroundings, its fertile vineyards, its good-natured people. But alas! the unfortunate scholastic derives no benefit from all these attractions. His life is wasted in fruitless plodding and incessant abnegation. He is the true picture of a grind; pale, shortsighted, with unkempt hair, always in the same shabby antiquated dress, so he lives on, year after year, in his gloomy den. His meals consist of peas, beans and cabbage; next to no care is taken of his room; his bed is a hard mattress lying close on the floor; sitting on it at night he is surrounded by books, and when at last the candle has burnt down and he lies back to seek rest, even then his studies pursue him and keep him awake until the early morning hours. It is no wonder that such a life cannot have a great charm for Architrenius. After having again given vent to his feelings by passionate declamations and profuse tears, he travels on and with the beginning of the fourth canto, suddenly steps out of the most tangible reality into the shadowy realm of Allegory. A mountain arises before his eyes, covered with beautiful groves of the rarest trees and fragrant with the perfume of the choicest flowers. From its summit runs a crystal brook over pebbles of gold and silver, and on its highest peak there stands a vast and luxurious castle. This is the Mount of Ambition. Ambition herself, and with her other states of mind and faults of a similar nature such as Hypocrisy, Anxiety, Adulation, are thought of as monsters creeping all over the surface of the mountain and lurking from under the trees and bushes, whereas still more repelling vices such as Fraud, Perjury, Cruelty, reside in the castle in company with a large crowd of devotees and worshippers. The sight of all this prompts Architrenius to profuse lamentations about the temptations and evils of court-life, with which the fourth book closes. The fifth canto brings him to the Hill of Presumption, inhabited by a large number of people who in some way or other assumed a dignity or position

which they had no right to hold. Among them Architrenius notices Niobe, Phaeton, the Titans, Persius, the dabbling imitator of Horace, and Old Age which had dared, as the poet says, to creep over the face of Henry II, the then-reigning king of England and duke of Normandy. On the highest summit of this hill, Money is enthroned, the mother of all presumption and elation, and on a peak near by Arrogance, who, once a goddess, was together with Lucifer ejected from heaven, and is now visiting the palaces of the great on earth, but frequently, also, steals into the monastery and hides under a monks gown. Here the narrative is strangely interrupted through the sudden appearance of a knight, called Walganus, who without the slightest provocation proceeds to tell the tale, well-known to the readers of that time through the chronicle of GEOFFRY OF MONMOUTH, of the fabulous expedition of the Roman Brutus and his followers to England. And equally sudden is the change of scene which takes place with the beginning of the sixth canto. For here we see Architrenius on the island of Thule, which is represented as a region of eternal spring and happiness, in the midst of an assembly of Greek and Roman philosophers conversing about moral and theological questions. The speeches of these philosophers, nineteen in number, take up the sixth, seventh and a large part of the eighth canto. The first twelve, by Archytas, Plato, Cato, Diogenes, Socrates, Cicero, Plinius, Crates, Seneca, Boethius, Xenocrates, Pythagoras, are directed against vices. Then follows a pitiful complaint of Architrenius about the eternity of the punishments of hell, in answer to which the Seven Sages speak about the love of God and the humility and devotion of a Christian. At the end of all these speeches, Architrenius lifts his eyes and sees in a lovely garden, surrounded by a circle of saintly looking old men, the goddess Nature herself enthroned in imperial state. He approaches her, and is about to lay his doubts and troubles before her when she takes the words from his lips and tries to comfort him through a long exposition of the wisdom and order of the universe, which extends over into the ninth canto. Architrenius, however, is not in the least edified by this lecture on natural philosophy. On the contrary, he complains bitterly to the goddess of her injustice. "If you are so wise and powerful," he says, "as you describe yourself, why then do you not end my sufferings and let me share in the happiness of the universe"? And now Nature, at last, is in-

duced to give to the weary pilgrim a visible proof of her kindness. She tells him that he needs a wife; and in most glowing terms, she describes to him a girl, called Moderantia, who would be a suitable mate for him. Architrenius recovers from despair; Moderantia is introduced and the wedding of the happy couple is celebrated, the birds accompanying the sound of the harps, and all the Virtues attending in a chorus.

Considered as works of art neither the 'Palponista' nor the 'Brunellus' nor the 'Architrenius' offer much to attract our attention. As historical documents they bear important witness to the growth, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, of that spirit of individualism which is the soul of all modern life.









