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BALLADS AND BALLAD LITERATURE.

Read before the Hamilton Association, December 22nd, 1892.

BY H. B. WITTON.

With almost all peoples, ballads and rude poetry furnish the oldest fragments of history. Buckle, the historian, says: "All history is at first ballads." Besides their contributions to history, songs have helped to inspire national bravery, and in a variety of ways have made men happy and useful. The Norsemen had their Skalds; the Latin races their trouveres, troubadours, jouteurs and minstrels; the Germans had their minnesingers and meistersingers; and the Britons and Celts their gleemen and bards. Maistre Wace, who lived in the middle of the XII century, has left an imaginary description of the various poets who took part at the coronation of King Arthur. His is an interesting picture of a medieval minstrel company. His "idle singers of an empty day" he classifies into "jouteurs, singers and rhymers," and adds; "many songs might you hear, rote songs, vocal songs, fiddler's lays and notes, lays for harps, lays for sytols, lyres and corn pipes, symphonies, psalteries, "monochords, cymbals. Of performers there were plenty, male "and female, and some said tales and fables."

At festivals, public and private, the minstrel was an important personage. In the Gothic hall of the noble his harp and voice were ready with stories oftentimes told, but ever new, of knightly bravery in battle, and devotion in love; while at more public gatherings such as the visitation of a bishop, the installation of an abbot, or above all, at the coronation of a king, national themes became the burden of his song. But the minstrel was as much at home, and was as welcome in the cottage of the peasant as in the hall of the baron. A fragment from "Chevy Chase," some of the exploits of Robin Hood, or a minor ditty of local bravery, love, devotion or suffering, sufficed to make all listeners akin, and assured the minstrel a welcome wherever he went. Chaucer's picture of the minstrel of his time is realistic and evidently from the life:

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