

Perry, Ben Edwin, The Ancient Romances (Univ. of Calif. Press) 1967

When he stated in Il Peter: "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." He then goes on to talk system, assuming that they were typical of the romance in its pristine character, and that the distinctive features of Chariton's work were merely so many aberrations from an originally sophistic norm, due mainly to decadence. On this assumption we were told, for instance, that the simplicity of Chariton's plot was a deficiency due to want of imagination or ingenuity in the invention and multiplication of episodes, that he imitated the substance of all the other romancers, and that the historical background of his narrative, instead of being due to an early literary convention, was only a bit of arbitrary decoration or flavoring, as a recent writer calls it in effect - superimposed on a story that was pure invention from the bottom up. In Rohde's theory of development the romance passes from Antonius Diogenes at one pole to Chariton at the opposite, from the complex, unreal, sophistic and externalized at the beginning of its career to the simple, naively sentimental, and quasi-historical at the end. This theory does not need to be refuted today, since no one accepts it in principle; but its baleful influence still lives, particularly in the tendency to regard ancient romance as a by-product of professional rhetoric, and in certain other misconceptions which have not yet disappeared from what is casually or perfunctorily written about the Greek romances.

What was the rational basis, in the nineteenth century, for this completely erroneous dating of Chariton? Was it inferred from any internal evidence of a positive nature, or from any external testimony? The answer is no. It was only a hazy guess, fostered by historical accidents in the textual transmission of the several romances, and by the vogue which the sophistic romancers, Heliodorus, Longus, and Achilles Tatius, had enjoyed among the precieux of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and, before that, among the Byzantines.