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## Sources of Serendipity: The Tale of *Three Princes of Serendip* as a Phenomenon of Literary and Cultural Transfer and as an Object of Comparatist Practices

The set of stories around *The Three Princes of Serendip* has become famous as the literary fairy – tale tradition which inspired Horace Walpole, creator of the *gothic novel*, to coin the highly versatile notion of ‘serendipity’ in a letter to Horace Mann from January 28, 1754. The *Urszene* of serendipity shows the three travelling princes – who are destined to become famous (and soon notorious) for repeatedly discovering “things they were not in quest of” – as they skilfully reconstruct the whereabouts of a runaway camel in a detective – like manner by looking at tracks and traces on the ground and comparing them with other findings. The story that includes this famous scene originates from narrative traditions in Persia, India and neighboring countries in the Middle Ages which can be seen as interesting examples of very early non – Western versions of the classical detective or ‘investigator’ story. The *Three Princes* tale was presented in a European language for the first time in 1557 when Cristoforo Armeno published his work *Peregrinaggio di tre giovani figliuoli del Re di Serendippo* in Venice. Further translations and rather loose adaptations of the ‘exotic’ oriental tale and into other European languages followed, including Xavier de Mailly’s French version from 1719 (which would directly inspire Walpole’s conceptual invention of ‘serendipity’) and leading up to Umberto Eco’s *Il nome della rosa*. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the fairy – tale tradition of *The Three Princes* also got into the focus of vivid scholarly discussions in the early days of comparative literary studies in the German – speaking world. The debates about the origin of the tale in medieval Indian and/or Persian sources in journals such as the *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteraturgeschichte und Renaissance – Litteratur* represent an early example of specific scholarly practices that would later be institutionalized under the disciplinary rubric of Comparative Literature – and in many cases, these debates themselves originated from serendipitous philological findings of which their discoverers were “not in quest”. My contribution seeks to firstly analyze the historical reception of the fairy – tale of *The Three Princes of Serendip* as an exemplary phenomenon of literary transfer across linguistic and cultural borders as well as an exemplary object of comparatist scholarly practices and, secondly, to discuss the role which ‘serendipity’, a concept that would not exist without this specific literary tradition, may play in such processes.

keywords: literary transfer, cultural transfer, fairy – tale, serendipity, comparative literary studies