Chapter 1

THE ORIGINS
OF SERENDIPITY

*T*he letters that passed between Horace Walpole and Horace Mann
form what Wilmarth S. Lewis calls the Andean range of the Walpole cor-
respondence.[1] The two friends, who were also distant cousins, exchanged
these letters over a period of forty-six years (1740–1786), although, after
Walpole's visit to Florence in 1741, he and Mann, who long remained
British minister to the Court of Florence, never saw each other again.
Walpole wrote all his many letters for posterity, but these letters to Mann
were particularly designed to be a "kind of history,"[2] a chronicle of im-
portant political and social events. Inevitably, and as a matter of his char-
acteristic taste, many "unimportant" incidents crept into his letters, too,
and one such item came to mean much more to a small and growing
segment of posterity than Horace Walpole could possibly have antici-
pated.

Writing to Mann on January 28, 1754, apropos of the arrival in En-
gland of the Vasari portrait of the Grand Duchess Bianca Capello, which
Mann had had sent to him, Walpole told of how he made a "critical
discovery" about the Capello arms in an old book of Venetian arms:

> This discovery I made by a talisman, which Mr. Chute calls the *sortes Wal-*
> *polianae*, by which I find everything I want, *à pointe nommée* [at the very
> moment], wherever I dip for it. This discovery, indeed, is almost of that kind
> which I call *Serendipity*, a very expressive word, which, as I have nothing

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[1] Wilmarth S. Lewis's introduction to the Walpole-Mann correspondence, in *The Yale
Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis (New Haven, Conn.: Yale
University Press, 1937–1983), vol. 17, p. xxiii.

[2] Letter to Mann, 28 January 1754, in *Walpole's Correspondence*, vol. 20, pp. 407–411.

better to tell you, I shall endeavour to explain to you: you will understand it better by the derivation than by the definition. I once read a silly fairy tale, called *the three Princes of Serendip*: as their Highnesses travelled, they were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of: for instance, one of them discovered that a mule blind of the right eye had travelled the same road lately, because the grass was eaten only on the left side, where it was worse than on the right—now do you understand *Serendipity*? One of the most remarkable instances of this *accidental sagacity* (for you must observe that *no* discovery of a thing you *are* looking for comes under this description) was of my Lord Shaftsbury, who happening to dine at Lord Chancellor Clarendon's, found out the marriage of the Duke of York and Mrs. Hyde, by the respect with which her mother treated her at table.

Since he had "nothing better to tell," therefore, Walpole was reporting to his friend a bit of whimsy, a word he had coined. His attitude toward it was half-pleased (the word is "very expressive"), half-mocking and deprecatory. Had Mann looked into the fairy tale that helped Walpole to mint the word, he might have been confused, for its story line scarcely resembles Walpole's account of it or the allegedly parallel examples he provides. Walpole *was* looking for information about the Capello arms and only happened, by "serendipity," to find it at just the right moment, but the three princes of the fairy tale *found* nothing at all, but merely gave repeated evidence of their powers of observation. Moreover, Lord Shaftsbury actually did make a useful discovery that he had not anticipated, one that he could not have made without considerable "sagacity" about the minutiae of the symbols of respect and deference, just as one now gauges impending changes in the status of Soviet leaders by noting their location in the Kremlin ensemble on public occasions. The complexity of meaning with which Walpole endowed serendipity, carelessly and inadvertently, at its inception, was permanently to enrich and to confuse its semantic history.

The "silly fairy tale" that Walpole referred to was called *The Travels and Adventures of Three Princes of Sarendip*. According to the title page, it was "translated from the Persian into French, and from thence done into English," and printed in London for Will. Chetwode in 1722. As far as Walpole knew it was anonymous, but we shall have more to say later about its authorship and history. The three princes of the title are the sons of Jafer, the philosopher-king of Sarendip (or Serendib, which is the ancient name for Ceylon).[3] King Jafer had seen to it that his three promising sons received the best possible education from the wisest men in the

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[3] [Nowadays, Ceylon is called Sri Lanka. However, this manuscript was written in the 1950s, so all references to Ceylon remain unchanged.]

kingdom, and now he wished them to travel in order that they might gain in experience to complement their book learning. Above all, he wanted them to learn about the customs of other peoples. There is never any mention of a search for treasure, which has so often been ascribed to them by those who know the tale at second or third hand.

"As their Highnesses travelled" they had various adventures and made certain "discoveries." Their adventures resulted from the use they made, and that other people made, of their keen wits; and their "discoveries," which were of the nature of Sherlock Holmesian insights rather than more conventional "treasures," often proved valuable to those whom they encountered. In two episodes they used their ability to make careful observations and subtle inferences, practicing this skill for the sheer pleasure its exercise afforded. In another episode, they did their host, the Emperor Behram, a valuable service, when, by virtue of their keen observations and their intuitive understanding of human psychology and physiology, they were able to save him from the vengeance of a treacherous minister. At still another court they visited, they passed yet another age-old test of wit, the solution of riddles, both humorous and serious. In all these adventures they conducted themselves with great courtesy and modesty.

Of all these many incidents, the one that seems to have impressed Horace Walpole the most is one of the princes' exploits of observation and inference. (It is, in fact, the first incident that occurs in the course of their travels; perhaps Walpole never got any further in this "silly fairy tale.") As the princes were riding along, they met a camel driver who had lost one of his camels and asked if they had seen it. Since they had seen various clues that might indicate the lost animal, they asked him the following three questions: Was the animal blind in one eye? Was it lacking one tooth? And was it not lame? The driver answered all these questions affirmatively, so they in turn told him that they had passed his animal and that it must have gone quite far by now.[4]

The camel driver searched the road for twenty miles without finding his missing animal, so he returned and again came upon the three youths. He told them that he thought they had merely been teasing him, so they gave him further evidence: that the camel was laden with butter on one side and honey on the other, that it was being ridden by a woman, and that this woman was pregnant. Now the driver was sure that the princes must have stolen the camel, and he had them brought to justice before the Emperor Behram. The princes confessed that they had never really seen the camel and that they had only told the driver of inferences drawn

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[4] Motifs of this kind were common in the eighteenth century, as we shall see. Voltaire was only one of many to anticipate the techniques of Sherlock Holmes in this way.

from the clues they had observed, which happened to coincide with the facts.

The incident ended happily when the camel was found. The emperor, now vastly impressed, wished to know how the princes had so accurately inferred its characteristics. They explained to him their guess that the camel must be blind in the right eye because the grass had been cropped on the left side of the road, where it was worse than on the right; that they had found bits of chewed grass on the road, of a size indicating that they had fallen out between the animal's teeth where a tooth was missing; that its footprints showed that it was lame and was dragging one foot; that its load of honey and butter could be inferred from the trail of ants on one side of the road, for ants love butter, and of flies on the other, for flies love honey; that at one place they saw footprints that they attributed to a woman rather than a child because they also felt carnal desires there; and finally, that this woman must be pregnant, because they had seen the imprints of her hands on the ground, where, in her heavy state, she had used them to get to her feet again.

It was the "discovery" of the blind right eye that Walpole evidently remembered best and which he used to illustrate the princes' peculiar talents. By the time he was "deriving" serendipity for Mann's benefit, however, his memory had transformed the camel of the original story into a mule. As an Englishman he was certainly more familiar with mules than with camels; perhaps this is why the alien camel was transformed into the more familiar mule. For this story in its essentials is, as we shall see, an old one. As it was told in India, for example, it involved an elephant, while in Palestine and Arabia it generally was the camel, as in the tale of our three princes.[5] In each case the cultural background produced at least this small variation in the protagonists of the story. In like manner, the already complex meaning of Horace Walpole's "very expressive word" was on many future occasions to be slightly or drastically modified by the social context of its use.

These, then, were the immediate occasions of the invention of serendipity: an episode in a story of three princes of Serendip in which they displayed their powers of observation and found certain clues they had not been looking for; Horace Walpole's unexpected discovery of an item missing from his knowledge of heraldry, one among many such accidental discoveries; and, finally, Walpole's letter to Sir Horace Mann, in which he indulges himself by elaborating on the nature of certain aspects of the process of discovery. But all this tells nothing of how it was that Horace Walpole, living in England, in the year 1754 came to merge these partic-

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[5] See Joseph Schick, *Die Scharfsinnsproben*, vol. 4, part 1 of *Corpus Hamleticum* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1934).

ular ingredients to fill a minute space in the English language by creating this strange new word, serendipity. From all indications, this was the result of two unrelated sets of circumstances: One is the great efflorescence of interest in the Orient in the eighteenth century; the other, Walpole's idiosyncratic propensities, which he brought to the reading of the tale of the three princes of Serendip.

Both England and France had had some contacts with the East and with Oriental history and literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the great upsurge of interest did not come until Antoine Galland translated the *Arabian Nights* into French, between 1704 and 1717. His translation of the *Arabian Nights* was quickly followed by Petis de la Croix's translation of *La histoire de la Sultane de Perse . . .* (1717) and *Les Mille et un Jour* [*sic*] (1710–1712). In France, these tales from the Orient were welcomed for several reasons: they provided an escape from the restrictions from classicism, they were found to be a useful device for social criticism (Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* and Voltaire's *Zadig* are, perhaps, the most famous examples), and they provided writers such as Crébillon *fils* with a takeoff point for his *contes licencieux*, which satirized the then-popular *contes morals*.[6]

The response in England to the tales from the Orient was in some respects similar to that in France. "The magical atmosphere, the rich variety of dramatic incident, the spirit of adventure, and the brilliant background" of the *Arabian Nights*, the telling of a story for its own sake, and the food these stories provided for peoples' "imagination, their fancy, their emotion" were congenial with the incipient romanticism of the period, in England as in France.[7] In England, the social and literary satire that used oriental tales was, however, far milder than the French: "French satire, more pervasive and more penetrating, expressed—especially when touched by the genius of Voltaire and Montesquieu—something of the deep unrest of France in the eighteenth century, the era before the Revolution. . . . The typical English writer of philosophic oriental tales, on the contrary, dwelt in an imaginary country of pure speculation, and entered the world of fact only for the purpose of moralizing."[8] The moralizing tendency was extremely powerful in England in this period and it stifled the oriental tale. "Too exotic to become easily acclimated, such tales were regarded as entertaining trifles, to be tolerated seriously only when utilized to point a moral."[9] Except for their

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[6] Martha P. Conant, *The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), p. xxv.

[7] Ibid., pp. 12, 241, 245.

[8] Ibid., p. 231.

[9] Ibid., p. 233.

romantic appeal, then, the chief reason for the vogue of the oriental tale in Francophile England was its vogue in France.[10]

Walpole's interest in and familiarity with oriental tales was no greater than might be expected of a literary man of his time. Nor was his mockery of these tales unusual, in the later eighteenth century especially, and it is, in part, his longevity that is responsible for the gamut of his attitudes. Walpole was fond of the *Arabian Nights*, and the contempt he expressed for the *Three Princes* was, as Mancroft suggests, at least partly feigned.[11] Walpole himself, in his *Letter from Xo-Ho* (1757), made use of the oriental tale for satiric ends, commenting on the contemporary scene by means of the pseudoletters of an oriental observer. The *Letter from Xo-Ho* was successful and went through five editions in a fortnight. "It is a brief, witty satire, aimed chiefly at the injustice of the system of political rewards and punishments, as exemplified in Admiral Byng's recent execution. . . . The oriental disguise is extremely thin, but it is cleverly used to point the satire."[12] Nearly thirty years later, in 1785, Walpole mocked the literary worth of the oriental tales in his parody, the *Hieroglyphic Tales*. The preface to these tales, according to Miss Conant, "is rather a clever satire on the pretentious, highly moralistic, and would-be scholarly prefaces to oriental tales. . . . Walpole's tone of supercilious mockery toward the oriental tales was typical of critical opinion generally between the middle of the century and the end of our period (c. 1786)."[13]

Two of the moral themes of eighteenth-century oriental tales are worth isolating here, because they lead us back, more or less directly, to The Word, serendipity. One of these recurring moral themes is that of the hedonistic paradox. In two of Hawkesworth's tales, for example, the heroes find "that the attempt to be happy at any cost ends in greater pain. Both tales represent an idea that was persistent in the philosophy of the eighteenth century, and was to find its most artistic expression in *Rasselas* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*."[14] Walpole seems to be falling in with this moralistic theme when he stresses the importance of *not* looking for the object of discoveries by serendipity. Yet, it must also be said that the oriental tales are philosophically and morally hostile to the notion of the operation of chance. In Miss Edgeworth's moral tale, "Murad the Unlucky,"[15] modeled on the oriental pattern, ill-luck turns out to

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[10] Ibid., p. 238.

[11] See Arthur M. Samuel, Baron Mancroft, "Serendipity," in *The Mancroft Essays* (London: J. Cape, 1923).

[12] Conant, *Oriental Tale in England*, pp. 187–188.

[13] Ibid., pp. 220–221.

[14] Ibid., pp. 96–97.

[15] Maria Edgeworth, "Murad the Unlucky," *Popular Tales* 2 (1804): 199–282. This story, although not published until 1804, was similar to many in the earlier period.

be identified with imprudence; and in Voltaire's *Zadig*, one of the most important themes is "the part played in human life by destiny—the apparent supremacy of Chance and the real supremacy of a foreknowing and overruling Providence."[16] Walpole was undoubtedly familiar with this moral and philosophical problem (he had read *Zadig* in the English translation in 1749), but he seems to have rejected the current formulations of the answer. It was not, perhaps, sheer whimsy that made him substitute serendipity for "what Mr. Chute calls *sortes Walpolianae*," for, whether *sortes* is translated as "luck" or "fate," it lacks the mixture of those two ingredients that Walpole irrevocably included in the complex meaning of serendipity: accident and sagacity. It may be that, of the two, Walpole preferred to accent sagacity rather than accident, and it is certainly true that in the future many users of the word were to try to minimize the accidental component in the meaning of serendipity. But whether he so intended it or not, Walpole's new word has done much to emphasize the role of accident in the process of certain kinds of discovery.

Inevitably, certain of Walpole's personal, often idiosyncratic, traits have crept into our allusions to him as a man of his time. Only the thoroughly second-rate mind would not have certain individualized responses to the intellectual problems of the age. But Walpole's idiosyncrasies amounted more nearly to departures from the norms of his group—what the sociologists call deviance—than to individualism. Many of the things that had value and significance for him were of small account in the lives of his contemporaries. His sensitivity and timidity, his almost effeminate withdrawal from the social and intellectual rough-and-tumble of the time, might have made of him only an ineffectual and ridiculous eccentric had he not also had the unusual strength to turn his weaknesses into virtues. Walpole made the most of his defenses, he cultivated his special tastes and preferences, and since he was a man of considerable talent, much that he created was of great and permanent merit.

Walpole would not enter the hurly-burly of politics in which his father had thrived, and rarely if ever used his seat in the House of Commons to make a contribution to the ongoing debates. Instead, he devoted great energy and effort to the building of Strawberry Hill, to his Strawberry Hill press, to his published writings, and to his letters. In the fields that were congenial to him he was more than a mere dabbler; rather, he was a careful student. This is true even of his gossip. Without doubt, Walpole was a gossip, even a malicious one, but he gossiped with so much perceptivity and thoroughness—even, we might say, with such thorough conscientiousness—that posterity has long since dignified his gossip with the name "social history."

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[16] Conant, *Oriental Tale in England*, pp. 101, 137.

Walpole enshrined the odd and the quaint, and often made a great deal of what appeared to others to be trivial. But even his most antipathetic critic, Thomas Macaulay, had to admit that his juxtaposition of oddities or incongruities could be unusually fruitful: "He had a strange ingenuity peculiarly his own," Macaulay says, and in another place: "He coins new words, distorts the senses of old words, and twists sentences into forms which make grammarians stare. But all this he does not only with an air of ease, but as he could not help doing it. His wit was, in its essential properties, of the same kind with that of Cowley or Donne. Like theirs, it consists in an exquisite perception of points of analogy and points of contrast too subtile for common observation. Like them, Walpole perpetually startles us by the ease with which he yokes together ideas between which there would seem, at first sight, to be no connexion."[17]

Walpole was rarely able to take seriously anything that did not touch him personally; his interest in politics, for example, was almost always directly related to the fate of his father's reputation or the political fortunes of his friends. But he had the kind of originality that led his idiosyncratic and egocentric interests to be of lasting interest to others. The finding of "new connexions" and "subtile analogies" delighted him; one such connection led him to the neologism serendipity. But Walpole's defensiveness made it impossible for him not to treat the things he valued without self-mockery and self-deprecation. As a result, he himself contributed to delay in their recognition. As Leslie Stephen says: "Walpole was no colossus; but his peevish anxiety to affect even more frivolity than was really natural to him, has blinded his critics to the real power of a remarkably acute, versatile, and original intellect. We cannot regard him with much respect, and still less with much affection; but the more we examine his work, the more we shall admire his extreme cleverness."[18]

It was in this characteristic spirit, half-delighted, half-deprecatory, that Walpole reported to Sir Horace Mann his coinage of serendipity. Once we know something of the eighteenth-century background and, more particularly, of interest in the Orient current at that time, and once we examine more closely Walpole's propensities, that one brief fragment of a letter in which Walpole writes about serendipity stands revealed as an essential product of these ingredients. Here is Walpole, familiar with oriental literature and fond of the *Arabian Nights*, yet seeming to deprecate, and rightly, the "silly fairy tale" he has read; here he is a collector of art and an expert on heraldry, yet one who makes light of a new acquisi-

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[17] Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Walpole's Letters to Sir Horace Mann," *Edinburgh Review* 58 (1833): 227–258.

[18] Leslie Stephen, *Hours in a Library* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1876), vol. 2, p. 197.

tion and of new knowledge; and here he reports a word coinage that delights him, but half apologizes for telling his friend about it, as he has "nothing better to tell."

Walpole was an inveterate maker of words. Macaulay testifies to Walpole's fondness for neologisms, and so also does Odell Shepard in his novel *Jenkins' Ear*, which purports to be a "narrative attributed to Horace Walpole, Esq." Shepard has the fictitious editor of Walpole's fictitious manuscript say, "I soon found myself shortening interminable sentences, inserting marks of quotation where I knew he was using the words of other men, adding necessary punctuation, and changing neologisms such as 'smuggle' and 'serendipity' and 'womanagement' into words that can be found in Dr. Johnson's Dictionary."[19] As befalls every creator of words, many of Horace Walpole's creations were short-lived and never resurrected. Judging by *womanagement* (one of the early portmanteau words in a tradition to be developed to its peak by Lewis Carroll and vulgarized by *Time* magazine), it would be rash to say that this was because they dealt with unimportant problems; but it is certainly not too much to say that in the world of "discoverers" of all kinds, Walpole's neologism serendipity has an aptness—to say nothing, for the present, of its other qualities—which has greatly facilitated its eventual diffusion. We shall see that those engaged, vocationally or avocationally, in looking for "finds," whether they are antiquarians, book collectors, or scientists, seem to have a special proclivity for "accidental sagacity"; and as a consequence, they have much enjoyed making use of Walpole's single expressive word to designate their experience.

Serendipity occurs only once in all of Walpole's writings, although in that instance, in his letter to Mann, Walpole speaks of his discovery as "of a kind which *I call* [our italics] *Serendipity*." He certainly implies frequent usage here. But if he did use it often, it could only have been in conversation. On March 2, 1754, Walpole wrote to Richard Bentley of "a new instance of the *Sortes Walpolianae*,"[20] which enabled him to identify a certain portrait. But though, in the letter to Mann, he claimed to prefer serendipity to *sortes Walpolianae*, he gives no sign of the preference here, just a month after he had reported it to Mann. Perhaps he hesitated to run it into the ground by an excess of repetition. Many years later, in a letter to Miss Mary Berry, February 2, 1789, he was to write: "It is a misfortune that words are become so much the current coin of society, that, like King William's shillings, they have no impression left; they are so smooth, that they mark no more to whom they first belonged than to

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[19] Odell Shepard and Willard Shepard, *Jenkins' Ear: A Narrative Attributed to Horace Walpole, Esq.* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), p. vi.
[20] *Walpole's Correspondence*, vol. 35, pp. 161–164.

whom they do belong, and are not worth even the twelvepence into which they may be changed: but if they mean too little, they may seem to mean too much too, especially when an old man (who is often synonymous for a miser) parts with them."[21]

The eighteenth century has been described as the greatest age of conversation. This only emphasizes the comparatively little "oral history" of that century. Until the very recent development of "oral history," there are relatively few records of the spoken word, and the great bulk of conversations of the past are of course lost beyond recall. The few notable exceptions are such records as Luther's or Goethe's table talk, or such a gem as that handed down to us by Boswell. Even an experienced anthologist, James R. Sutherland, could find no instances of eighteenth-century "polite conversation" for his *Oxford Book of English Talk*, and so we can only speculate rather vaguely about this kind of conversation.[22]

In quality, eighteenth-century conversation must surely have attained considerable distinction, for in the salons of Paris and London a great premium was placed both on the substance of what was said and on the wit with which it was conveyed.[23] In Paris, especially, the art of conversation was enhanced by the rivalry among the formally organized salons. As far as the quantity of conversation is concerned, Bernard Berenson maintains, perhaps rashly, that in this respect too the eighteenth century was par excellence the age of conversation and deserves more recognition as such: "And conversation should have the same privilege that is granted—reluctantly enough—to the other fine arts, the privilege from utilitarian purpose. The result may be of little consequence, as eighteenth century conversation doubtless was; the more so as in that least unhappy of centuries a larger number of people were enjoying talk than at any previous moment in history, even if we include the Athens of that greatest of all conversationalists, Plato's Socrates."[24]

Whether the use of superlatives is justified in discussing the eighteenth-century conversation is of no great importance; many of the more educated and intellectual men and women of the time did find in conversation a form of recreation, and, indeed, of competitive recreation. To excel in conversation it was desirable that one be knowledgeable without being pedantic, or, to put it another way, that one be both well-informed and witty. Serious subjects were best concealed in humorous disguise, since, for good or ill, people tended to become bored by the serious or affected

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[21] Ibid., vol. 11, p. 3.

[22] James R. Sutherland, *Oxford Book of English Talk* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

[23] M. Glotz, *Salons du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1945); Valerian H. Tornius, *Salons: Pictures of Society through Five Centuries* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1929).

[24] Bernard Berenson, *Sketch for a Self-Portrait* (New York: Pantheon, 1949), p. 33.

to be so, and to be boring was the ultimate failure. Subtly interwoven with this battle of wits there was another kind of battle, a battle for social prestige. In an age when the aristocracy was the undisputed highest class in the society, the canons of aristocratic conduct were widely acknowledged and the greatest social prize was acceptance by the aristocratic elite. Many a drawing room conversationalist was fighting not merely for the laurels of that art but for the social rewards his wits might bring him.

We can, again, only speculate about the compatibility of these two goals of success in the realms of conversation and of "Society." Clues for such speculation are to be found in the relationship between class status and language, in the stratification of language. As Otto Jespersen noted, some time before the voguish interest in *U-speech*,[25] we may "speak of an 'upper class' language and a 'lower class' language: 'the classes and the masses' are distinguished by their speech as much as by their clothes and their ways of thinking."[26] To what extent then was conversational brilliance in the eighteenth century compatible with the use of "upper-class language"? And, more specifically, to what extent did (or does) upper-class language tolerate the use of neologisms?

Opinions vary on this interesting question, and there is not much evidence. Alexander Pope, in his *Essay on Criticism*, held that

> In words, as fashions, the same rule will hold,
> Alike fantastic if too new or old;
> Be not the first by whom the new is tried,
> Nor yet the last to lay the old aside.[27]

Since Pope was a member of the kind of society in which Walpole moved, his opinion holds special interest for us. Pope's dictum has its ambiguities. For one, it is not clear whether he is addressing himself to all his readers, including those who were already among the "best people," who must be assumed to know how to conduct themselves in these matters. His advice, then, might have been meant for those who wished to emulate the best people and so win acceptance into their circle. In that

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[25] [The expressions "u-speech" and "non-u speech" became fashionable in England and in America in the mid-1950s, after the publication of an essay by Nancy Mitford, herself a member of that English upper class she satirically portrayed in her novels. She derived both terminology and concept from "Linguistic Class Indicators in Present-Day English," an article by Professor Alan S. C. Ross that was first printed in a learned Finnish journal, *The Bulletin of the Neo-philological Society of Helsinki* (1954), and reprinted as "U and non-U: An Essay in Sociological Linguistics" in Alan S. C. Ross et al., *Noblesse Oblige: An Enquiry into the Identifiable Characteristics of the English Aristocracy*, ed. Nancy Mitford (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1956)].

[26] Otto Jespersen, *Mankind, Nation, and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925), pp. 141–142.

[27] Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), part 2, verses 131–135.

case, there still remain two possible interpretations of his dictum: He might be suggesting that the social elite does, in fact, behave in the way he has described, or that such behavior is necessary only for those striving to win acceptance by this group. The latter appears more likely, for if all followed his dictate, how could anything new ever arise? If Pope is reporting fact in the form of a homily for climbers, we would infer that the use of the would-be telling neologism was familiar to the established upper class in the eighteenth century.

More than a century later, Thorstein Veblen dealt with the same matter, but unlike Pope, he tried to analyze the differential use of words by different social classes rather than to advocate particular use. At first sight, Veblen appears to come to a conclusion different from the one we finally attributed to Pope; he appears to maintain that neologisms are not a part of upper-class speech: "A discriminating avoidance of neologisms is honorific, not only because it argues that time has been wasted in acquiring the obsolescent habit of speech, but also as showing that the speaker has from infancy habitually associated with persons who have been familiar with the obsolescent idiom. It thereby goes to show his leisure class antecedents. Great purity of speech is presumptive evidence of several successive lives spent in other than vulgarly useful occupations."[28] Behind Veblen's declaratory statements, however, are the same optative and manipulative implications as in Pope's dictate: Veblen can also be read as saying that for those who would wish to be accepted as members of the upper class, regardless of their actual antecedents, great purity of speech is particularly essential.

Two examples come to mind here, examples of the use of a kind of private language, composed both of new words and of "distortions of the sense of old words" (see Macaulay on Walpole's language), and in each case the users came from families that had definitely arrived in Society. The first is "Glynnese," created by William E. Gladstone's in-laws, the Glynnes. Writing of Glynnese, Gladstone's biographer Philip Magnus says:

> The Lytteltons and the Gladstones [Lord Lyttelton and Gladstone married the Glynne sisters] were so numerous and devoted, so quick, eager and vital, that for many purposes they felt themselves to be self-sufficient. They invented a kind of language for themselves, which was formally embodied by Lord Lyttelton in 1857 in a glossary which was privately printed. It was entitled *Contributions Toward a Glossary of the Glynne Language by a Student (George William, Lord Lyttelton)*. . . . Gladstone, who loved to hear Glyn-

[28] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: Macmillan, 1899), pp. 303–304.

nese spoken, did not often use the language himself. But Mrs. Gladstone used it on every possible occasion.[29]

Now, Gladstone was never really able to win full acceptance in that Whig society of which his wife was by birth a charter member; Gladstone was felt by the old Whigs to be "Oxford on the surface, Liverpool underneath"; and the Hon. Emily Eden said of him: "there was an element of parvenuism about him, as there was about Sir Robert Peel. . . . In short, he is not frivolous enough."[30] Gladstone, the middle-class outsider, might perhaps have felt that it was unsuitable for him to use the Glynne language, symbol of the pretense he avoided of belonging in the society of his wife's family.

The other family with a language of its own creation was the Barings, and they too were well established as members of the social elite. Sir Edward Marsh, a great friend of Maurice Baring, describes the language in his autobiography: "I have mentioned the Baring language, or to speak more idiomatically, 'The Expressions.' It was started, I believe by Maurice's mother and her sister, Lady Ponsonby, when they were little girls, and in the course of two generations it had developed a vocabulary of surprising range and subtlety, putting everyday things in a new light, conveying in nutshells complex situations or states of feeling, cutting at the roots of circumlocution. Those who had mastered the idiom found it almost indispensable."[31] Among those who had mastered it were high officials in the Foreign Office, members of the literary elite such as Desmond MacCarthy, and many others. In this circle, the "Expressions," far from being frowned upon, were used as a symbol of unquestioned membership and helped mark off the boundaries of the group.

The foregoing is only an apparent digression, for it leads us back to the nature of conversation in the social world in which Horace Walpole moved, and to the part he played in this conversation. Although Walpole was not of the oldest or highest aristocracy, his acceptance in the highest social circles of his day was unquestioned. In matters of social class, at least, Walpole gives no evidence of insecurity, though his timidity might have made him withdraw from certain more lusty kinds of social gatherings. It is at least plausible that he did not hesitate to entertain and amuse his friends with his latest word coinages. It is reasonable to assume that here, as elsewhere, he made the most of his somewhat eccentric talents, and that if he was able to embellish his conversation with a pretty new word, he probably did so. In this way, Our Word, serendipity, may well

[29] Philip Magnus, *Gladstone: A Biography* (New York: Dutton, 1954), pp. 125–127.

[30] Ibid., pp. 141–142.

[31] Edward Marsh, *A Number of People: A Book of Reminiscences* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939), p. 72.

have found its way into many a drawing room, there to enhance Walpole's reputation as a witty conversationalist.

Having gone so far with our speculations, perhaps we may carry them yet one step farther. In the world of fashions of all kinds, there a "trickle-down" process has been identified. In the course of this process, items introduced as "fashionable" at the very highest level of society gradually come to be used in ever wider circles, which model their behavior on that of the elite. As the popularity (in the strictest sense of the word) of these items increases, they become cheapened, and they are, consequently, discarded by the elite in favor of a new item. Though this process is most often associated with fashions in clothes,[32] it operates in the same manner with regard to other articles of consumption, including words—exclusive usage enhances their value, while popular usage diminishes it. So appealing a word as serendipity (we shall see much evidence later of its appeal) might have become popular enough in Walpole's conversational circles for its author to feel compelled to abandon his word-child. It would be of interest to know whether the boom serendipity was to have in the middle of the twentieth century is a repetition of an earlier boom, however brief, in the mid-eighteenth century.

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Horace Walpole was not the only writer of the eighteenth century to be particularly taken with the story of the three princes and the camel (or mule). Voltaire seized upon the same theme and incorporated it in one of the episodes of his novel *Zadig* (1748).[33] Indeed, it is a theme that has fascinated people through the ages.

The basic "plot" of the tale is the demonstration of skill in detection, which, in turn, is proof of general quick-wittedness. Tales of detection of this kind—tales of *Scharfsinnsproben*, as German scholars have called them—had their origin in antiquity in the Far East, in India and China, and in the Semitic countries of the Near East. They have many themes: the discovery of paternity and bastardy, the distribution of an inheritance, and, finally, the description either of an unseen object or of the provenance of a known object from various clues and traces. It is this last theme that is involved in the adventure of the three princes of Serendip that attracted both Walpole's and Voltaire's attention. The three princes "describe" a camel that they have never seen, as well as its rider and its load. (In a later episode, they detect that the wine they are drinking came

[32] See Bernard Barber and Lyle S. Lobel, "Fashion in Women's Clothes and the American Social System," *Social Forces* 31 (1952): 124–131.

[33] François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, *Zadig: Histoire orientale* (London-Amsterdam, 1747).

originally from a vineyard in a cemetery, that the lamb they are eating was once nursed by a bitch, etc.) Although, as we mentioned earlier, the cultural context in which the story occurs may cause some variation in its exact content, many of the significant details and the grounds of inference vary only slightly from story to story, and those in the story of the princes of Serendip overlap considerably with the common core. Similar stories can be found in the Babylonian Talmud, in the Jewish Midrasch Ekāh, and much later, in the eighteenth century, in the *Arabian Nights* story of the "Sultan of Yemen and His Three Sons." René Basset, in his *Contes Populaires d'Afrique*, recounts yet another similar story.[34]

European interest in the literature of the East came as a by-product of commercial contacts and political involvements. The highly educated commercial aristocracy of Venice, especially, found much of interest in Oriental culture, and Venetian ambassadors to Constantinople and points east learned much of the language and customs of these countries. Our tale of detection, more specifically our camel story, appears in Italian literature for the first time in the writings of one of Boccaccio's students, Giovanni Sercambi (1344–1424), as a tale called "De Sapientia." More important, there appeared in 1557 in Venice the *Peregrinaggio di tre giovani figlivoli del Re di Serendippo*, by Christoforo Armeno, "dalla Persiana nell'Italiana lingua trapportato."

This Christoforo was, indeed, an Armenian, who in the middle of the sixteenth century spent three years in Venice and there wrote that loosely connected series of tales, the *Peregrinaggio*. Christoforo's immediate model for the episode of the princes and the camel, which serves to get the long and rambling story going, as well as for other episodes in the *Peregrinaggio*, was the *Hast Bihist* of the Persian writer of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century Amir Khosrau.[35]

There is considerable evidence for the popularity of Christoforo's work. Four new editions in Italian appeared within less than a century: in 1584, 1611 (this one is in the Harvard College Library), 1622, and 1628. Further, there were numerous translations. It was translated by Johann Wetzel into German and published in Basel in 1583, and this edition was republished in 1599, and again, in a reworked form, in 1630. In French, there appeared one translation by Francois Beroalde in 1610, a very free translation by Simon Gueulette in 1712 (which Voltaire used for *Zadig*), and a more accurate one by de Mailly in 1719. From de Mailly's translation three further translations were made, into English in

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[34] René Basset, *Contes populaires d'Afrique* (Paris: E. Guilmoto, 1903).

[35] This is the opinion of Joseph Schick, whose study is the "last word" on the subject. Earlier authorities had different opinions, which we shall discuss later in connection with scholarly interest in the subject of these tales.

1722 (*The Travels and Adventures of Three Princes of Serendip*, which
Walpole read), into German in 1723, and into Dutch in 1766. Although
much of the interest in this work was only a part of the more general
interest in everything oriental, some part of it may have been generated
by the particular theme of the story.

By the early nineteenth century, the long tradition of genuinely schol-
arly interest in folklore and mythology converged with interest in the
Orient, and from that time on, we find recurring in scholarly literature
discussions of tales of detective skill in general and of our camel story in
particular. The first such scholarly treatment (apart from editions of the
Arabian Nights, etc.) was probably that of J. C. Dunlop. Dunlop retells
the camel story when he discusses the sources of the episodes of *Zadig*,
and he traces it from Voltaire back to Gueulette, from Gueulette to
Christoforo, and thence to an Arabic work of the thirteenth century titled
Nighiaristan.[36] (According to Schick, our final authority, the *Nighiar-
istan* was itself a copy of the work of Amir Khosrau.) The next orientalist
to pay attention to the tale was Joseph von Hammer, who translated the
Nighiaristan version in his *Geschichte der Schönen Redekünste Persiens*
(1818). He also is familiar with the connection between this story and
Zadig, and says that "unless he is mistaken," Voltaire found the story in
d'Herbelot's collection of oriental tales.[37]

Again, the camel story appears in one of the manuscripts collected by
Col. Colin Mackenzie and edited by H. H. Wilson, (1828), and Wilson
draws attention to it as "illustrative of the oriental origin of part of
Zadig."[38]

More and more was added to scholarly knowledge about the camel
story in general and the history of Christoforo's story in particular. In the
notes to his edition of the *Arabian Nights*, A. Loiseleur-Deslongchamps
points out the similarity of the story of the "Three Sons of the Sultan of
Yemen" to the episode in *Zadig* of "Le chien et le cheval," and he sug-
gests that Voltaire could have based this episode either on Gueulette's or
de Mailly's translation of Christoforo. He refers also to Persian and In-
dian stories of this kind, and to one by the early Danish writer Saxo
Grammaticus.[39] In Germany in the later nineteenth century, a scholar by
the name of Theodor Benfey took a great interest in these stories of keen

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[36] J. C. Dunlop, *The History of Fiction* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1842), pp. 329–
330.

[37] Joseph von Hammer, *Geschichte der Schönen Redekünste Persiens* (Vienna: Heubner
und Volke, 1818), pp. 307–309.

[38] Colin Mackenzie, comp., *The Mackenzie Collection*, ed. H. H. Wilson (1828; re-
printed Calcutta, Madras: Higginbotham and Co., 1882), p. 222.

[39] Notes to his edition of *Arabian Nights*, ed. A. Loiseleur-Deslongchamps (Paris,
1841), pp. 690–691.

observation and inference, and in 1864 he published a fragment of his translation of the *Peregrinaggio* with an introduction.[40] In this introduction he proposes new possibilities as to the origin of the *Peregrinaggio*, and he, too, describes many similar stories with only minor variations on the basic theme.

From here on, scholarly discussions become more and more intricate and refined, and it is only worth mentioning some of the leading scholars and the main direction of their thought. In an article written in 1885, Israel Levi points out numerous Jewish prototypes of our tale.[41] Georg Huth, in 1889, points to many Indian and Arabic versions, but leaves the question of priority open.[42] But in the next year, in the same publication, Siegmund Fraenkel claims that the stories could have originated only in Arabia.

As far as the *Peregrinaggio* specifically is concerned, it was reprinted in 1891 in *Erlanger Beiträge zur Englischen Philologie* by Heinrich Gassner, with a brief introduction by Heinrich Varnhagen. Johann Wetzel's early (1583) translation into German was published with extensive editorial notes by Hermann Fischer and Johannes Bolte in the Bibliothek des Literarischen Vereins.[43] Fischer and Bolte present for the first time the detailed genealogy of translations from Christoforo. They again mention numerous oriental versions of the story: Arabic, Jewish, Turkish, and Indian. In 1932, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Benfey's death, Richard Fick and Alfons Hilka published his entire translation of the *Peregrinaggio* as *Die Reise der drei Söhne des Königs von Serendippo*, with a long introduction. Here, they put forward the novel theory that Christoforo never existed at all and that the "translation from the Persian" is a literary fiction. They believe the *Peregrinaggio* was compiled by an Italian, possibly by the publisher of the first edition, Michele Tramezzino.

The last authority, in every sense, is Joseph Schick's *Die Scharfsinnsproben*.[44] The objective of Schick's monumental work appears to be the tracking down of the themes of the Hamlet legend (sad and needless to say, Schick never completed his work), and one of these themes is the *Scharfsinnsprobe*, or proof of skill in observation and inference. In the

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[40] Theodor Benfey, fragment of his translation of the *Peregrinaggio* (with introduction), *Orient und Occident* 3 (1864): 256–288.

[41] Israel Levi, in *Revue des études juives* 11 (1885).

[42] Georg Huth, in *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literaturgeschichte* N.F. 2 (1889): 404–414; Sigmund Fraenkel, in *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literaturgeschichte* 3(1890): 303–330.

[43] Christoforo Armeno, *Die Reise der Söhne Giaffers*, trans. Johann Wetzel, ed. Hermann Fischer and Johannes Bolte, vol. 208 of Bibliothek des literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart (Tübingen: Literarischer Verein in Stuttgart, 1895).

[44] Schick, *Scharfsinnsproben*.

early version of the Hamlet legend of Saxo Grammaticus, Hamlet gives evidence of great skill of this kind. While he is visiting the court of the king of England to obtain the hand of his daughter in marriage, Hamlet disdains a meal that had been prepared for him. He is overheard saying that he cannot eat it because there is blood in the bread, the water tastes of iron, and the meat smells of corpses. Further, he remarks that the king has the eyes of a lowly servant, and the queen has thrice prostituted herself. The king proceeds to make inquiries, and Hamlet turns out to have been correct in each of his observations and inferences. The king is so impressed with the keenness of his intelligence that he gives Hamlet his daughter's hand.

The history of the story of the description of the unseen camel (or elephant, or ass) is, therefore, a *Scharfsinnsprobe* of great importance in Schick's work. His work appears to comprehend everything that has been written on the subject before and to add a great deal to this body of scholarship. As far as the *Peregrinaggio* is concerned, Schick resurrects Christoforo after Fick and Hilka discredited his existence: He was, it seems, the Armenian Chachatur, who Italianized his name. And as we have already mentioned, he points to the work of Amir Khosrau as the undoubted source of the *Peregrinaggio*. (As for *Zadig*, Schick maintains that Voltaire's source of inspiration was certainly Gueulette.) Schick's research on stories of the detection of unseen animals, a specific case in the generic pattern of *Scharfsinnsproben*, places their origin in early Indian literature, where they involved the description of an elephant. The camel story as such probably occurred first in Arabia and was transmitted from there.

Although the Hamlet in the legend of Saxo Grammaticus does indeed perform intellectual feats very similar to those of our three princes of Serendip, in Shakespeare's version of the Hamlet story this particular incident has disappeared. There, Hamlet is not so much the keen observer who happens to notice an odd or incongruous detail and draws a useful inference from it, but the experimentalist who *contrives* a situation in which it may be possible to make significant observations to support or discredit an existing hypothesis. He sets up the play within the play to test and study his uncle's reactions, to find proof of his guilt or innocence. The element of contrivance makes the play within a play a planned experiment in the reconstruction of what is or was, from traces observed here and now. Hamlet's procedure is almost like that followed by experimental scientists, who frame a hypothesis and then set up an experiment to "see what happens." Less often, the scientist will share the experience of the three princes of Serendip: He will *happen* to notice "something" he had not expected, and his inferential reconstruction of how it came to be may put him on the track of a discovery. In this manner, for instance, Wilhelm Roentgen happened to notice that certain of his photographic

plates had become unexpectedly clouded, and he inferred the action of X-rays on these plates.

Directly or indirectly, the story of the three princes and the camel has led us to two important patterns of scientific thought. Another analogy of the patterns of thought of the three princes of Serendip can be found in the world of science. This analogy was observed not immediately in connection with the tale that delighted Horace Walpole, but with that which has aroused so much more interest by virtue of its author's eminence: *Zadig* by Voltaire. In the episode titled "Le chien et le cheval," Zadig demonstrates that same skill in observation and inference as the three princes of Serendip, only in his case his skill enables him to describe a lost royal bitch and royal horse. The cynical and satirical overtones are Voltaire's own contribution: Zadig's superior ability gets him into trouble with the authorities, and he is not, ultimately, rewarded. So he vows in future to keep his observations to himself, but this only involved him in further trouble.[45]

In an article titled "The Method of Zadig," T. H. Huxley shows how important an element this "method" is in scientific thinking, and especially in certain of the sciences. "What, in fact, lay at the foundation of all Zadig's arguments," says Huxley, "but the coarse, commonplace assumption, upon which every act of our daily lives is based, that we may conclude from an effect to the preexistence of a cause competent to produce that effect?" And he goes on to say: "the rigorous application of Zadig's logic to the results of accurate and long-continued observation has founded all those sciences which have been termed historical or palaetiological, because they are retrospectively prophetic and strive toward the reconstruction in human imagination of events which have vanished and ceased to be."[46] In effect, the method of Voltaire's Zadig must be used in science when the experimental method of Shakespeare's Hamlet *cannot* be used.

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[45] As we saw, Voltaire probably used Gueulette's translation of Christoforo as the basis of his tale. In any case, Fréron's charge, in *L'année litteraire* (1767), that Voltaire plagiarized de Mailly seems to be inspired chiefly by malice, since it can scarcely be said that a story that has gone through so many versions can be plagiarized.

[46] T. H. Huxley, "On the Method of Zadig: Retrospective Prophecy as a Function of Science," *Nineteenth Century* 7 (1880): 929–940; reprinted in T. H. Huxley, *Science and Hebrew Tradition* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), quotations from pp. 7, 9. [The extremely accurate but alas obsolescent term *palaetiology* was coined by the historian and philosopher of science William Whewell, "to describe those hypotheses which . . . refer to actual past events, but try to explain them by causation laws" (as in geology). See W. Whewell, *History of the Inductive Sciences* (London, 1837), vol. 3, p. 481. Not only Huxley, but also other Victorian scientists relied on Whewell's ingenuity in inventing scientific terms. Incidentally, it was Whewell who coined the English word *scientist*, anonymously in 1834 and explicitly in 1840. See Robert K. Merton, "De-Gendering 'Man of Science': The Genesis and Epicene Character of the Word *Scientist*," in *Sociological Visions,* ed. Kai Erikson (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 225–253.]

Unlike experimentation and retrospective prophecy—"retroduction" in the language of Isaiah Berlin and others—which cannot, by Huxley's definition of the latter, occur simultaneously, it may depend on the interest of the observer whether one and the same discovery is described as a retrospective prophecy or a discovery by serendipity, or happy accident. If we compare the different descriptions of the discoveries Heinrich Schliemann made in the process of his excavations, we can see how two different observers made different abstractions from the same events, or, to put it another way, how they described these events with varying emphasis. C. W. Ceram, in his book *Gods, Graves and Scholars*,[47] mentions some unexpected finds made by Schliemann, but for him these are of negligible importance compared to the staggering amount of material that Schliemann found that he *had expected* or prophesied; Hendrik Van Loon, on the contrary, in *The Arts*,[48] makes Schliemann's discoveries the very exemplification of serendipity, and stresses how much of value he stumbled on in the course of his excavations, over and beyond any anticipation. We shall have repeated occasion to see later that it is such different emphases in description, sometimes ideologically conditioned, sometimes not, that play a considerable part in the receptivity of different people to serendipity, both as a pattern of behavior and as a word.

Horace Walpole's somewhat confusing "derivation" of serendipity came about, in all probability, by just this kind of discriminating use of emphasis. It was not so much that he misunderstood the import of the fairy tale he had read, but that he highlighted those aspects of it that were significant to him and obscured those of lesser interest. What appealed to him in the story was the *unplanned, accidental* factor in the making of the discovery, and the "sagacity" necessary to make it. The three princes had not set out to find a lost camel, he himself had not set out to find the Capello arms, and Lord Shaftesbury had not planned to make any discovery about Anne Hyde's marital affairs when he accepted her father's invitation to dinner. But without the princes' keen powers of observation, without his own know-how in the field of heraldry, and without Shaftesbury's profound knowledge of etiquette, none of these "discoveries" could have occurred. What Walpole obscured in his explanation of serendipity was the nature of the object discovered: whether it was a known quantity or an unknown quantity; whether it was something that might have been expected (retrospectively prophesied) or not; and, finally, whether it was of any significance or not. It is in the latitude that these obscurities give to individual interpretation that the complexity of

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[47] C. W. Ceram, *Gods, Graves, and Scholars: The Story of Archeology*, trans. E. B. Garside (New York: Knopf, 1951).

[48] Hendrik Van Loon, *The Arts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937).

meaning of serendipity has its origin. Even had Walpole stated positively that serendipity had to do only with accidental discovery, his ambiguity about the finder's foreknowledge of the object of discovery meant that discoveries by serendipity came to be regarded as more or less accidental. But these initial ambiguities became compounded as the word serendipity acquired a variety of meanings in the course of its diffusion to varied social groups.