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FOUNDATION STUDIES IN LITERATURE.



INTRODUCTORY ESSAY.

EVER since the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey" of Homer were recognized as literary masterpieces, writers of all nations have found in them not only subjects for the exercise of their own genius, but an inexhaustible fund of illustration which in these days we call mythological and classical allusions.

Greek mythology has become so interwoven with our literature that some knowledge of it is absolutely necessary on the part of the reader of modern history, poetry, essays, or even fiction, if he would read with ease and any true appreciation of the thought of the author.

The average reader passes over these allusions as he does over the French and German quotations, not quite satisfied, but having neither the time nor the opportunity to consult the proper reference book.

And even if both time and opportunity are at his disposal, what a waste of energy is involved in the process! What a slow, laborious, unsatisfactory method of acquiring knowledge is that which presupposes the constant use of a dictionary or encyclopædia! Of course these and other books of reference have their place and are

indispensable to every student, but when one is reading for pleasure or for culture, and especially when one is reading poetry, the frequent interruption to look up allusions destroys the reader's pleasure utterly. Yet students are urged to do this by teachers and writers who are supposed to be competent guides for young readers. One writer on this subject says, "Until the habit of looking up allusions has been acquired and practised, a reader does not know what he has lost of possible knowledge of the pertinence of illustration, example, and analogy, borrowed from another avenue of literature than the one through which the author is leading him. Unfortunately only the few are well versed in historical knowledge, legendary and mythological lore, the language of art, and the learning of science. Yet, if a reader follow the author's lead every time, he will soon find that he brings to his reading an ever-increasing fund of desirable information which can be applied over and over again."

Now we claim if our reading were guided aright, if teachers had the right ideas of selection and arrangement, we could gain from literature itself the power to interpret other literature.

The myths, as we find them in our hand-books of mythology or in our classical dictionaries, have no especial merit; it is their adaptability for illustration that commends them to authors of all times and conditions, that shows them to be of permanent interest to the reading world. The educational value of the study of mythology has been underestimated by the great

majority of our teachers, even by those who have had a classical education, until very recently.

That there has been a great waking up on this subject no one can doubt who takes notice of the supplementary reading now recommended by the best educators throughout the country. Publishers vie with one another in bringing out in most attractive form the stories from the Greek and Latin classics especially written for young readers. How charming these stories are both teachers and pupils who have read them are willing to testify. But however interesting and delightful these prose stories may be made, they must be supplemented by *poetry* on the same subjects before the student is prepared to take up the study of the history of English literature, or the reading of the masterpieces of English literature, as he is expected to do in his high school course.

Every traveller who visits the great art museums of European cities, and especially those of Rome, realizes that his education has been much neglected unless he has studied the ancient classics, for here he finds their myths embodied. They look at him from the canvas of Raphael; their marble forms speak to his sense of beauty and harmony. What if they speak in a dead language?

So great an educational value have the famous paintings and sculptures, that even the cheapest copies of them, like photographs, become the treasures of those who have seen the originals and have learned their history. The field of English literature is so large that a

lifetime is not sufficient to explore its highways, even if the reader has time to devote to it, and his taste leads him to the highways instead of the byways. What, then, can we do for our students that will help them to better results than the vague, unclassified, chaotic ideas concerning books and authors which the majority of readers possess?

The translator and the printing press have added to our original English literature the literature of every nation and every language on the face of the earth, yet with all this acquisition of literary wealth we must hold fast to the old Greek and Latin masterpieces if we would find ourselves at home among the authors of the world.

These ancient classics have been truly called the *ABC* of literature, and whoever wishes to gain the power to interpret modern thought correctly must be familiar with them either in the original or by means of translations.

Perhaps the most striking example of this necessity will present itself when the student begins to read "Paradise Lost." Milton drew his illustrations so largely from classical sources that not one in a hundred who begins his greatest work ever finishes it, simply because of inability to understand the allusions with which it abounds.

The following passage from the first book of "Paradise Lost" is perhaps the finest example of the author's power of bringing his whole range of historic knowledge to bear upon a single point. He represents Satan at the head of his army of fallen spirits.

"He through the arméd files
Darts his experienced eye, and soon traverse
The whole battalion, views their order due.
Their visages and stature as of gods;
Their number last he sums. And now his heart
Distends with pride, and hard'ning, in his strength
Glories: for never, since created man,
Met such embodied force as nam'd with these
Could merit more than that small infantry
Warr'd on by cranes; though all the giant brood
Of Phlegra with the heroic race were joined
That fought at Thebes and Ilium, on each side
Mix'd with auxiliar gods; and what resounds
In fable or romance of Uther's son,
Begirt with British and Armoric Knights:
And all who since, baptiz'd or infidel,
Jousted in Aspramont, or Montalban,
Damasco, or Marocco or Trebisond,
Or whom Biserta sent from Afric shore,
When Charlemagne with all his peerage fell
By Fontarabia. Thus far these, beyond
Compare of mortal prowess, yet observed
Their dread commander."

Here we have a comparison of Satan's armed host with all those that have won historic fame from the time of Homer to that of Charlemagne. In the opening lines of the third book of the "Iliad," Homer compares the renewal of battle between the Greeks and the Trojans to the annual battle between the cranes and the pygmies, as if it were an event with which his hearers must be thoroughly familiar; and Milton, taking his cue from Homer, adds to this from so many different

sources, that we are almost overwhelmed with the cumulative weight of the comparison. It gives us a glimpse into the author's mind, and also shows us the sources upon which he drew for the wealth of imagery contained in every page of his poetry.

The reader who expects to enjoy Milton must bring with him knowledge gained from the same sources—the myth, fable, romance, legend, and history of the past.

The reading of any one of Shakspeare's plays forces the thoughtful reader to the same conclusion. Though "he knew little Latin and less Greek," his writings are saturated with ancient classic thought, no doubt gained from translations. Chapman's Homer, Surrey's Virgil, and North's Plutarch must have been his text-books. Not only do the Greek plays—"Midsummer Night's Dream," "Timon of Athens," "Troilus and Cressida"—and the Roman plays—"Coriolanus," "Antony and Cleopatra," and "Julius Cæsar"—vouch for his familiarity with classic poetry and ancient history, but his English "Kings" also teem with mythological allusions.

Falstaff says, "We, that take purses, go by the moon and seven stars, and not by *Phæbus*—he, that wandering knight so fair." And again, "Let not us that are squires of the night's body be called thieves of the day's beauty; let us be *Diana's* foresters." In the same play—"Henry IV.," Part I.—Sir Richard Vernon gives Harry Percy a picture of Prince Hal as he saw him preparing to take the field against the rebels.

"I saw young Harry with his beaver on,
His cuishes on his thighs, gallantly armed,
Rise from the ground like feathered Mercury,
And vaulted with such ease into his seat,
As if an angel dropp'd down from the clouds,
To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus,
And witch the world with noble horsemanship."

Hotspur's answer suits the description. He says:—

"Let them come;
They come like sacrifices in their train,
And to the fire-eyed maid of smoky war
All hot and bleeding will we offer them.
The mailed Mars shall on his altar sit
Up to the ears in blood."

In a lighter vein is the conversation between Lorenzo and Jessica,—Act V., Scene I., "Merchant of Venice"—but no less striking is the use of similes borrowed from the classics. Lorenzo and Jessica are walking in the pleasure grounds of Portia's house. He says:—

"The moon shines bright:—in such a night as this,
When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
And they did make no noise,—in such a night,
Troilus, methinks, mounted the Trojan walls,
And sigh'd his soul toward the Grecian tents,
Where Cressid lay that night.

Jessica. In such a night
Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew;
And saw the lion's shadow ere himself
And ran dismayed away.

Lor. In such a night
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand

Upon the wild sea-banks, and waft her love
To come again to Carthage.

Jes. In such a night
Medea gather'd the enchanted herbs
That did renew old Æson."

The poet makes even these minor characters in the play so familiar with the "Iliad," the "Æneid," the old story of the unhappy lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe, which originated in Babylon, and the story of Medea, the enchantress, whose arts secured to Jason the capture of the Golden Fleece, that they make them the subject of private conversation in the most natural manner. We do not feel that he is showing off his learning; he is simply using it for the purpose of illustrating and making more pleasing his own pictures of life and thought. In another part of the play there is an allusion to this last myth, showing that it must have been a favorite with him. Bassanio in describing Portia to Antonio says:—

"Her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a golden fleece,
Which makes her seat of Belmont, Colchos' strand,
And many Jasons come in quest of her."

These few examples gathered from the most familiar of Shakspeare's plays might be multiplied to hundreds, but perhaps they are sufficient to show that it would be great economy on the part of the student to go to these original sources of illustration before attempting to read the great poets of his own language.

If the tragedies of Æschylus are, in his own words, "made-up dishes from the great Homeric banquet," what shall we say when we compare all the other great epic and dramatic poems that have become a part of our English literature by means of translations, with the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey"? The conclusion reached by Dr. Johnson more than a hundred years ago applies with equal force to the present:—

"Modern writers are the moons of literature; they never shine but by reflected light, by light borrowed from the ancients."