

MYTHOPŒIC ERUDITION.

BY GEO. W. SHAW.

THERE is a tendency in some minds to resolve history into myth. Those who indulge it are not half educated visionaries, but generally serious thinkers and sometimes profoundly learned. In the crucibles of their analysis strange compounds appear. Homer ceases to exist, and is replaced by a cycle of rhapsodists. The Trojan war becomes a solar myth. William Tell did not fight at Morgarten. Stout old Judge Samson was not a Jewish Shophet, but the sun—his hair the sunbeams.

“All is illusion: naught is truth.”

A small etymological peg will suspend one theory.* Some myth of a former age or remote race may furnish an analogy confirmatory of another. Having by their methods resolved the facts of history into myths, these savants are at once confronted with the question how such myths originated. Having no direct evidence of facts which probably never occurred, but are confidently assumed, they are left to conjecture their causes. Imaginations vary, and each inquirer is free to elaborate his own hypothesis.

“Raw Americans and fanatical women” may participate in such controversies, but do not begin them. They originate in the minds of scholars and professors.

The most amusing display of futile erudition witnessed by the nineteenth century was the attempt to class the Trojan war among solar myths. It had for its champion no less a scholar than Max Müller. Nor was the idea relinquished even after Schliemann had brought out the valuables of Priam’s Treasury, and shown the five scathed walls of his citadel.

* שׁוֹשַׁן connects with שׁוֹשַׁן. Was not Samson strong like Hercules? Was not Hercules identical with the Phœnician Baal? Ergo, Samson was a solar man, i. e., the sun. Saltatory logic indeed! but who can prevent men from arguing this if they choose?

Wolff's theory of the authorship of Homer was supported by an amount of learning rarely surpassed. There is a reason for these follies of the wise. Those who commit them apply impracticable rules of evidence at first and end in a maze of conjectures. For example let the rule be (as it sometimes is) adopted, that no fact is to be accepted unless attested by an observer. Facts of recent occurrence can often be thus shown, and such proof is of the highest order. After the lapse of a generation such evidence is unattainable, but the written statements of an observer may remain. A few generations more, and these have disappeared, but quotations from them may remain. A time comes at last when a fact can neither be shown by a contemporary author, nor from one who has ever seen a quotation from a contemporary. Let the fact be then considered as unattested and unworthy of serving as a basis of any conclusion. It still appears, however, that men have believed in that fact. Why did they believe? The natural conclusion that they believed in the fact because it was a fact being rejected, and a more satisfactory explanation demanded, any conjectural explanation may be preserved. The methods adopted are parallel with those of the Greek authors who sought to account for the stories of gods and heroes. There was the historical theory of Euemerus: the gods were men and women. The allegorical method was favored by Plato and the Neo-Platonists: the gods were human qualities personified.

There was also the elemental theory of Heraclides: the gods were elements or heavenly bodies.

Our modern mythopœic academicians incline at present to the latter theory. The solar myth is a favorite recourse. Great men have to encounter enmities and opposition. Comparison of such a man with the sun struggling with thick clouds, now bursting forth in brightness and anon setting in gloom presents an allegory too obvious to be ignored. The metaphor hardens into a theory; the theory into asserted fact. A similar process resulting in the production of another supposed myth gives the professor of the "science" of Comparative Mythology an opportunity of discoursing on the general prevalence of such myths. Some day Washington at Valley Forge may furnish fine material for a sun myth. It is an old remark that unreasonable skepticism leads to absurd credulity.

I do not object to wholesome reserve and strict scrutiny of historical evidence. I only emphasize the necessity of investigation unfettered by artificial canons, and ready to avail itself of any source of truth without disdain of hearsay or tradition. Who has not seen courts of law so restrained by rules of evidence as to be unable to

ascertain material facts practically known by all present? A long credited and not impossible occurrence is not to be regarded as mythical or doubtful because we do not know the evidence on which it has been believed. There may have been abundant evidence now inaccessible.

There are myths partly probable and partly improbable: others which consist wholly of the supernatural and improbable.

The former may have a substratum of fact; but the difficulty of separating the real from the imaginary should compel us to relinquish conjecture and insist on evidence. The latter may embody important truths deeply disguised. We are not to despair even of these, but to look for light in every direction. The myth of Belus as it appears in Diodorus, is an illustration.

Belus was a son of Zeus and Lybia. He led a colony from Egypt. He was the first king of Babylon, and entertained Zeus there. His name was that by which the Babylonians called Zeus. He was buried in Babylon, and the Persians destroyed his tomb which the Chaldeans exhorted Alexander to rebuild.

Can any myth be more inconsistent and absurd? And yet it contains much latent truth.

Hammurabi, the first powerful king of Babylon, built a great temple to Bel. The temples of the old Chaldean gods were regarded as their tombs.* The temple had been wholly or partially destroyed by the Persians, and the Babylonians were anxious for its restoration.

Perhaps much more lies concealed in this myth, and may some day come to light.

Myths are shattered fragments of history illumined by the moonlight of fancy; but we praise not those ancient or modern, erudite or illiterate, who reduce history to ruins, though gleams of sunshine may disclose the former outline.

* Hilprecht, *Babylonia*, p. 459 et seq.