

BOOK REVIEW AND NOTES

HOMER AND THE PROPHETS or HOMER AND NOW. By Cornelia Steketee Hulst. Published by Open Court Publishing Co., Chicago, Ill.

A wonderful book, a book that marks a new epoch in the study of Homer and Greek culture and civilization. The author has proved herself a profound scholar and has produced a monumental work. It is not too much to say that no book of recent years does greater credit to American scholarship or is deserving of more pronounced success. The author shows that the mythology of Homer was on a much higher level than that of the time of Plato, the latter being a degeneration, and that Roman mythology shows a still greater departure from that of the age of Homer.

The myth is the oldest form of truth, and mythology presents to us the knowledge which the ancients had of the source of all things, that is to say, of the Divine. The object of mythology is to find God and come to him. Out of the mythology comes the epic in which the gods and goddesses are associated with human actors. Thus, we find the story of the Volsungs and Niblungs among the ancient Nordics, the Kalevala among the Finns, the Mahabharata and Ramayana among the Hindoos; and, what now is of special interest in connection with Mrs. Hulst's book, the Iliad and Odyssey among the ancient Greeks. As I conceive it, the Iliad and Odyssey are two parts of an original, much larger epic. There doubtless was a city like Troy, a war between the Greeks and the Trojans and a Greek victory, as a nucleus of the epics, but in the story we find the gods and goddesses taking part in events, and so presenting the highest Greek conception of wisdom, justice, culture, chastity, and of all personal, social and political problems and morals. That this is so is proved conclusively in Mrs. Hulst's book by her interpretation of the names given by Homer to the various heroes and heroines. The vicious characters have corresponding names while the good characters have names that are equally fitting. It is utterly impossible that these names should fit the characters by mere accident, and it is also impossible to conceive that these names should have been given to the children by their parents, for, as Mrs. Hulst shows:

(1) Some of them are not affectionate, as that of Antinoös (without mind, fool, idiot)

(2) Some fit the events which took place in mature life, as that of Paris (the adulterer), and

(3) That of Agamemnon can have been given to him only after his death. It means "remember a fatal marriage."

This latter refers to the scene in Hades when Agamemnon told Odysseus how his wife had killed him. The name of Helen is from an Arian root, meaning to shine, to beam, cognate with the root in Helios (the sun); and this is appropriate to this queen, because of her exceeding beauty. The character of Helen of Troy is pathetic because there is so much good in her and so little ignoble, because her husband was so unworthy and she supposed that Paris was as good as he looked and claimed to be. Menelaus (I stay behind), Agamemnon, and Aegisthus (a goat), are accursed with the accursed house, visited with the sins of their fathers in the fourth generation, and visited with doom. Especially the analysis of Menelaus is of interest and value for scholars, for all have taken it for granted that he became immortal as he hoped. Under Egyptian influence, later Greeks seemed to have thought that perhaps Helen was in Egypt, but as Mrs. Hulst shows, every fact from early tradition points to the victory of his people over Menelaus and the merciless death of Helen in Rhodes.

As was said by Schiller, "Man depicts himself in his gods"; or as Ingersoll almost blasphemously expressed it, "An honest god is the noblest work of man." Should we not say that the influence of the religion upon the people and that of the national character upon the religion are reciprocal? Mythology doubtless fundamentally is a deification of the forces of nature. Seeking to know the origin and destiny of themselves and the world about them, the people created their mythology, but the mythology in turn moulded the national character; and then the two, the mythology and the national character, acted and reacted upon each other.

Of absorbing interest in the volume before us are the parallels drawn by the author between Homer and the Prophets of the Old Testament. The parallels are most startling and show that there must have been much intercourse between the Greeks of Homer's time and the biblical epoch of the Prophets. The parallels, astonishing and conclusive, do not indicate whether the Greeks or the Hebrews obtained their ideas from each other. It is barely possible that they arrived at similar conclusions spontaneously. This question is left for future scholars to settle. The Israelites did not heed the warnings of their prophets, and so they degenerated and became a by-word among nations. The spirit of Homer culminated in the wise and humane laws of Solon, but in the course of time, the Greeks too degenerated. "Athens passed from the spirit of Homer to that of degenerate Rome of the Caesar's and Vergil. The imperial gods of devotion were now Ares, who was Roman Mars, and Aphrodite, Roman Venus. In turn, Athens became soon another perfect example of a nation so unwise as to permit injustice—a warning which others may heed—which they disregard at their peril. Like uncorrupted Israel of Moses and the Prophets, the uncorrupted Athens of Homer's wisdom and justice is an inspiration and hope to the world; like Israel in her decay she became a shaking of the head to the nations" (page 89).

And have not we of the twentieth century after Christ also degenerated? Do we not need to make a new study of Homer, of the Prophets, and of the laws of Solon? Do we not need to get back to the principles of wisdom, justice, and fundamental ethics? To help us in doing so, what a wonderful thing it would be for our people if we could have Homer's epics, both "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," for our movies, with interpretations on the screen, to spread the goodness, the truth and the beauty shown in this wonderful volume, **Homer and the Prophets**, and also to be used in the education of the coming generations!

Let me here call attention to another parallel to Homer and the Prophets, a third source of inspiration for the betterment of our degenerate world, that should be used in the same way. By the side of the streams coming down to us from the Greek and the Hebrew we have our Nordic Eddas and Sagas, our Odinic religion, and our Nordic epic of Sigurd the Volsung and the fall of the Niblungs. Here, also, the names fit the characters; Sigurd is the victorious, and the Niblungs are the nebulous. The code and the religious tenets of the old Nordics were, like those of Homer and of the Prophets, wisdom, justice, chastity, and all the virtues, perhaps greatest among these, courage. We must never forget that it was Nordic heroes and heroines who gave the death blow to the oppressive and corrupted ancient Roman Empire. What a vicious thing Roman literature was, reflecting that oppression and corruption and not condemning it! The products of the Roman authors, especially those of their poets and philosophers, are either a feeble imitation or absolutely worthless. Roman literature did not—like the Hindooic, the Hebrew, the Homeric and the Nordic, spring from the life of the people, by whom it had been nourished and cherished for centuries, but it was produced for pay and as an ornamental accomplishment, during the reign of that polished tyrant, Augustus, to please his ear. We may well call the literature of the Augustan period, "the golden age" in Roman literature, for it served to gild over those chains of Caesarism that were artfully forged to fetter the peoples living around the Mediterranean Sea, but which, by an inevitable decree of the Norns, the Romans were themselves destined to wear. When we think of this fact, is it not strange that the schools of all nations have clung so tenaciously to Roman literature, even after it had become nothing more than the remains of a dead language? H. A. Taine, the foremost critic of his generation, who was himself a disciple of Guizot, the historian of civilization, in speaking of the Romans, says: "If man, reduced to narrow conceptions and deprived of all speculative refinement, is at the same time altogether absorbed and straightened by practical occupations, you will find, as in Rome, rudimentary deities, mere hollow names serving to designate the trivial details of agriculture, generation, household concerns, etiquettes in fact of marriage, of the farm, producing a mythology, a philosophy, a poeetry, either worth nothing or borrowed. Among the ancients the Latin literature is nothing more, at the outset, than borrowed and imitative."

After this sweeping condemnation of the Romans from the scholarly pen of Taine, the reader may accept more calmly a few additional strokes from the hammer of Thor. Romanism has presented itself in history in

three distinct forms: first, as a chain forged by the Roman Caesars; second, as a crozier in the grasp of the Roman popes; third, as a rod in the hands of the Roman schoolmaster.

The Nordics were thoroughly successful in severing the political fetters forged by the Roman Caesars, and Nordic principles of individual liberty are engrafted more or less visibly into nearly all modern governmental systems. The second form of Romanism the Nordics have ever delighted in breaking, thanks to Wickliffe, to Luther and to every hero of religious progress and reform. What they instinctively abhor is slavery of conscience. Their profound, inexplicable mind cannot endure those transparent souls who claim to be in possession of infallible truth. But the third form of Romanism is the rod in the hands of the Roman schoolmaster, and this the Nordics have not yet broken, but every branch of the race, from North Cape to the Alps, from the Baltic to the Pacific, has more or less submissively kissed it, although it is really the most dangerous of the three forms of Romanism. It is nothing less than the murderous weapon concealed in the hand of an assassin. It has overawed our mothers and whipped the life out of our children, so that they could not command strength to break it. The great mistake that the Nordics have made is in short this: After having severed the fetters of the Roman emperors and subverted Roman despotism and corruption, after having broken the Roman crozier, they quietly submitted to the rod of the Roman schoolmaster, that is to say, they made the Latin language and literature, the very thing that had been at once the cause and the offspring of these evils, the basis of all education and culture. They adopted Roman principles of scholastic submission, they nourished and brought up the minds and hearts of Nordic lads and lasses on Roman thought. Like Romulus and Remus, Nordic infants have been exposed and left to be caressed and fondled and nursed by a wolf, instead of being nourished with the milk from the breasts of their own mothers. The Nordics have persisted in doing this for centuries, at a well-nigh complete sacrifice and disregard of their own records of the northern past, and at a most deplorable neglect of the Greek language, which is the great representative of South European thought and feeling. The North is brimful of artists and tale-tellers, like Homer, who give us a theology of well-defined gods, full of beauty and significance, who give us a close and delicate philosophy, and who present to us art and poetry remarkable for clearness, spirit, scope, truth and beauty. How foolishly we have acted as a race. While drinking from the Roman muddy stream we have suffered the Greek language and literature to be neglected, although it is a crystal clear stream flowing unadulterated from the Castalian fountains of Parnassus, indigenous and original, refreshing, with the purest poetry, history and philosophy. The Greek comes to us from a people who did not, like the Romans, employ slaves as their teachers, but who made teaching the highest position that a free man could attain—and I may add, it was selected by the wise Norns to be the means of bringing to us the gospel of the Galilean.

And what is worst of all in this connection is that we have wholly neglected our own old Nordic literature. We have, in fact, conducted

our schools, from the lowest to the highest, on the basis that our own forefathers were barbarians, who neither could nor did bequeath to us holy books that are to be studied and learned by child and grandchild so long as the race endures. We have holy books, a literary heirloom, bequeathed to us by our Nordic forebears, and they are as profound in thought and as sublime in sentiment as are the sacred scriptures of other peoples, nowhere equalled in tempestuous strength, in primitive vigor, in body of muscle. These books of the north we must study. We must study them more carefully and more zealously than any others, for they are the Bifrost bridge, the heavenly bridge of the gods, connecting our present with our past. They are, too, a mirror in which are reflected the prophetic, poetic and imaginative childhood of our race. If in order to properly understand the man we must study the life of the child, for "as the twig is bent the tree is inclined," so we must know what those old Nordics thought and felt and did in all directions, those Berserks and Vikings, who crushed Rome, introduced a new order of things and infused new blood and new spirit into the world.

Here we have a new parallel to Mrs. Hulst's remarkable book, from our own immediate forebears. With her splendid work, Mrs. Hulst has given her readers a mighty impetus to the study and reading and re-reading of Homer's great epics. She has helped to emancipate us from the shackles of Romanism in all its hideous forms; and incidentally her work will develop a deeper interest in other epics and in the sacred books of our Nordic ancestors, the Eddas and the Sagas.

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