The Iliad

Homer

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The Iliad

Homer

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The Iliad of Homer

Translated by Alexander Pope,

With Notes and Introduction
by the
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and Flaxman’s Designs.

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Contents

INTRODUCTION. POPE’S PREFACE TO THE ILIAD OF HOMER

THE ILIAD
BOOK I.
BOOK II.
BOOK III.
BOOK IV.
BOOK V.
BOOK VI.
BOOK VII.
BOOK VIII.
BOOK IX.
BOOK X.
BOOK XI.
BOOK XII.
BOOK XIII.

BOOK XIV.
BOOK XV.
BOOK XVI.
BOOK XVII.
BOOK XVIII.
BOOK XIX.
BOOK XX.
BOOK XXI.
BOOK XXII.
BOOK XXIII.
BOOK XXIV.

CONCLUDING NOTE.

Illustrations

HOMER INVOKING THE MUSE
MARS
MINERVA REPRESSING THE FURY OF ACHILLES
THE DEPARTURE OF BRISEIS FROM THE TENT OF ACHILLES
THETIS CALLING BRIAREUS TO THE ASSISTANCE OF JUPITER
THETIS ENTREATING JUPITER TO HONOUR ACHILLES
VULCAN
JUPITER
THE APOTHEOSIS OF HOMER
JUPITER SENDING THE EVIL DREAM TO AGAMEMNON
NEPTUNE
VENUS, DISGUISED, INVITING HELEN TO THE CHAMBER OF PARIS

VENUS PRESENTING HELEN TO PARIS
VENUS
Map, titled “GRÆCIÆ ANTIQUÆ”
THE COUNCIL OF THE GODS
Map of the Plain of Troy
VENUS, WOUNDED IN THE HAND, CONDUCTED BY IRIS TO MARS
OTUS AND EPHIALTES HOLDING MARS CAPTIVE
DIOMED CASTING HIS SPEAR AT MARS
JUNO
HECTOR CHIDING PARIS
THE MEETING OF HECTOR AND ANDROMACHE
BOWS AND BOW CASE
IRIS
HECTOR AND AJAX SEPARATED BY THE HERALDS
GREEK AMPHORA—WINE VESSELS
JUNO AND MINERVA GOING TO ASSIST THE GREEKS
THE HOURS TAKING THE HORSES FROM JUNO’S CAR
THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES
PLUTO
THE EMBASSY TO ACHILLES
GREEK GALLEY
PROSERPINE
ACHILLES
DIOMED AND ULYSSES RETURNING WITH THE SPOILS OF RHESUS
THE DESCENT OF DISCORD
HERCULES

POLYDAMAS ADVISING HECTOR
GREEK ALTAR
NEPTUNE RISING FROM THE SEA
GREEK EARRINGS
SLEEP ESCAPING FROM THE WRATH OF JUPITER
GREEK SHIELD
BACCHUS
AJAX DEFENDING THE GREEK SHIPS
CASTOR AND POLLUX
Buckles
DIANA
SLEEP AND DEATH CONVEYING THE BODY OF SARPEDON TO LYCIA
ÆSCULAPIUS
FIGHT FOR THE BODY OF PATROCLUS
VULCAN FROM AN ANTIQUE GEM
THETIS ORDERING THE NEREIDS TO DESCEND INTO THE SEA
JUNO COMMANDING THE SUN TO SET
TRIPOD
THETIS AND EURYNOME RECEIVING THE INFANT VULCAN
VULCAN AND CHARIS RECEIVING THETIS
THETIS BRINGING THE ARMOUR TO ACHILLES
HERCULES
THE GODS DESCENDING TO BATTLE
CENTAUR
ACHILLES CONTENDING WITH THE RIVERS
THE BATH
ANDROMACHE FAINTING ON THE WALL

THE FUNERAL PILE OF PATROCLUS
CERES
HECTOR’S BODY AT THE CAR OF ACHILLES
THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS
IRIS ADVISES PRIAM TO OBTAIN THE BODY OF HECTOR
FUNERAL OF HECTOR

INTRODUCTION.

Scepticism is as much the result of knowledge, as knowledge is of scepticism. To be content with what we at present know, is, for the most part, to shut our ears against conviction; since, from the very gradual character of our education, we must continually forget, and emancipate ourselves from, knowledge previously acquired; we must set aside old notions and embrace fresh ones; and, as we learn, we must be daily unlearning something which it has cost us no small labour and anxiety to acquire.

And this difficulty attaches itself more closely to an age in which progress has gained a strong ascendency over prejudice, and in which persons and things are, day by day, finding their real level, in lieu of their conventional value. The same principles which have swept away traditional abuses, and which are making rapid havoc among the revenues of sinecurists, and stripping the thin, tawdry veil from attractive superstitions, are working as actively in literature as in society. The credulity of one writer, or the partiality of another, finds as powerful a touchstone and as wholesome a chastisement in the healthy scepticism of a temperate class of antagonists, as the dreams of conservatism, or the impostures of pluralist sinecures in the

Church. History and tradition, whether of ancient or comparatively recent times, are subjected to very different handling from that which the indulgence or credulity of former ages could allow. Mere statements are jealously watched, and the motives of the writer form as important an ingredient in the analysis of his history, as the facts he records. Probability is a powerful and troublesome test; and it is by this troublesome standard that a large portion of historical evidence is sifted. Consistency is no less pertinacious and exacting in its demands. In brief, to write a history, we must know more than mere facts. Human nature, viewed under an induction of extended experience, is the best help to the criticism of human history. Historical characters can only be estimated by the standard which human experience, whether actual or traditionary, has furnished. To form correct views of individuals we must regard them as forming parts of a great whole—we must measure them by their relation to the mass of beings by whom they are surrounded, and, in contemplating the incidents in their lives or condition which tradition has handed down to us, we must rather consider the general bearing of the whole narrative, than the respective probability of its details.

It is unfortunate for us, that, of some of the greatest men, we know least, and talk most. Homer, Socrates, and Shakespere[1] have, perhaps, contributed more to the intellectual enlightenment of mankind than any other three writers who could be named, and yet the history of all three has given rise to a boundless ocean of discussion, which has left us little save the option of choosing which theory or theories we will follow. The personality of Shakespere is, perhaps, the only thing in which critics will allow us to believe without controversy; but upon everything else, even down to the

authorship of plays, there is more or less of doubt and uncertainty. Of Socrates we know as little as the contradictions of Plato and Xenophon will allow us to know. He was one of the _dramatis personæ_ in two dramas as unlike in principles as in style. He appears as the enunciator of opinions as different in their tone as those of the writers who have handed them down. When we have read Plato _or_ Xenophon, we think we know something of Socrates; when we have fairly read and examined both, we feel convinced that we are something worse than ignorant.

It has been an easy, and a popular expedient, of late years, to deny the personal or real existence of men and things whose life and condition were too much for our belief. This system—which has often comforted the religious sceptic, and substituted the consolations of Strauss for those of the New Testament—has been of incalculable value to the historical theorists of the last and present centuries. To question the existence of Alexander the Great, would be a more excusable act, than to believe in that of Romulus. To deny a fact related in Herodotus, because it is inconsistent with a theory developed from an Assyrian inscription which no two scholars read in the same way, is more pardonable, than to believe in the good-natured old king whom the elegant pen of Florian has idealized—_Numa Pompilius._

Scepticism has attained its culminating point with respect to Homer, and the state of our Homeric knowledge may be described as a free permission to believe any theory, provided we throw overboard all written tradition, concerning the author or authors of the Iliad and Odyssey. What few authorities exist on the subject, are summarily dismissed, although the arguments appear to run in a circle. “This

cannot be true, because it is not true; and, that is not true, because it cannot be true." Such seems to be the style, in which testimony upon testimony, statement upon statement, is consigned to denial and oblivion.

It is, however, unfortunate that the professed biographies of Homer are partly forgeries, partly freaks of ingenuity and imagination, in which truth is the requisite most wanting. Before taking a brief review of the Homeric theory in its present conditions, some notice must be taken of the treatise on the Life of Homer which has been attributed to Herodotus.

According to this document, the city of Cumæ in Æolia, was, at an early period, the seat of frequent immigrations from various parts of Greece. Among the immigrants was Menapolus, the son of Ithagenes. Although poor, he married, and the result of the union was a girl named Critheïs. The girl was left an orphan at an early age, under the guardianship of Cleanax, of Argos. It is to the indiscretion of this maiden that we "are indebted for so much happiness." Homer was the first fruit of her juvenile frailty, and received the name of Melesigenes, from having been born near the river Meles, in Bœotia, whither Critheïs had been transported in order to save her reputation.

"At this time," continues our narrative, "there lived at Smyrna a man named Phemius, a teacher of literature and music, who, not being married, engaged Critheïs to manage his household, and spin the flax he received as the price of his scholastic labours. So satisfactory was her performance of this task, and so modest her conduct, that he made proposals of marriage, declaring himself, as a further inducement, willing to adopt her son, who, he asserted, would become a clever

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