

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, Dec 20, 1890 to May 30, 1891)

Public Opinion in Homer

During several months in this year the attention of the American public has been fixed with intense interest on a series of questions of great political importance. The possibilities of extending our trade with South America; the problem of the needs of the industries of our country; and then again that ever recurring question how much we are and have yet to pay in the way of pensions. The evils which beset even our best attempts at pure municipal government: the corruption which political organizations seem inevitably destined to entail every where; these are matters which have recently been confounding us with particular force. To impress that upon the popular mind and conscience has been the work of weeks; to concentrate the force of popular opinion, had circumstances made it necessary, would be the work of a few hours. Seldom, perhaps, has anything illustrated more vividly that great and destructive condition of modern existence in free countries, the double power wielded by the newspaper press, at once as the ubiquitous instructor, and as the rapid interpreter of the public mind. It is natural at such a time for one where pursuits suggest the comparisons, to look from the modern to the ancient world, and to attempt some estimate of the interval which separates them in this important and striking respect. In the ancient civilizations were there any agencies which exercised a power analogous in-kind, though not comparable in degree, to that of the modern press? To begin with, the despotic monarchies of the far east, of China, Persia and Assyria, we feel that they will not detain us long. For them, National opinion meant normally the opinion of the King, we know the general style of the records which are found in graven on stone, in connection with the images or monuments of [there] monarchy. This is the sort of style which seems to prevail among the royal authors:—"He comes up with chariots; he said that he was my first cousin; I am Astarhshastra; I flogged his uncles; his brothers and his cousins. I am the King, the son of []; I crucified to thousand of the principal inhabitants; the I am the shining one, the great and the good"—

From the monarchical East one turns with more curiosity to Greece. There at least was a life of public opinion. Apart from institutions, which are public opium crystallized, were there any living non-official voices in which this public opinion could be heard?

The Homeric poems are not only the earliest monuments of Greek literature, but also the oldest documents of the Greek view. Out of the twilight of the historic past, a new people, a new type of mind, are suddenly disclosed in a medium of shadowy clearness. Like Athena springing adult and full-armed from the head of Zeus, this new race, where Homer reveals it, has already attained to a mature consciousness of itself, and is already equipped with the powers which are to distinguish it throughout its later history. The genius of the Homeric Greek has essentially the same trials which recur in the ripest age of the Greek Republic, even as Achilles and Odysseus are personal ideal, which never lost their hold on the nation. Also here we notice the contrast between two aspects of

Homeric life, the political and social. In Homeric politics public opinion has no proper place. The King, with his council of nobles and elders, can alone originate or discuss measures. The popular assembly has no existence. But the frame work of Homeric monarchy has a social life in which public opinion is constantly alert. Its strength indeed, could scarcely be greater under the frequent form of government. And we see that this strength has its origin in distinctive and permanent attributes of the Hellenic race. It arises from quickness of perception and readiness of speech. The Homeric Greek feels keenly, observes shrewdly, and hastens to communicate his thoughts. An indication of popular comment pervades the Homeric poems, and is rendered more impressive by the dramatic forms in which it is usually couched. The average man who represents public opinion is expressed by the indefinite pronoun— Tis —someone. “Thus would a man speak with a glance to his neighbor” in the regular Homeric formula. We hear public opinion in the process of development. This spokesman of popular sentiment is constantly introduced at critical moments. When in the fight before Troy, the contest is raging over the dead body of Patroclus, Tis remarks to his friend that they will be disgraced forever if they allow the Trojans to carry off the body; better perish on the spot. Hector in proposing a truce to Ajax, suggests that they should exchange gifts, and imagine what Tis will say. Tis will approve of it as a graceful act between chivalrous opponents. Menelaus considers that another hero, Antilochus, has beaten him in a chariot race by unfair means, but thinks it necessary to take precautions against Tis, imagining he has brought this complaint in the hope of prevailing by the influence of his rank. Is not this a remarkable complement to the penetration and to the influence of Tis?

Again, when the sounds of music and dancing, as at a marriage feast, are heard in the house of Odysseus this in Ithaca, Tis is listening outside; and he blamed Penelope for her imagined hardness of heart, because she had not had the courage to keep the house of her great Lord, Odysseus, steadfastly until he should come home. Tis is, however, not always the mouth piece of such noble sentiments. With a frank truthfulness to life and nature, Homer represents Tis as indulging in ignoble joy by stabbing the corpse of his once dreaded foe, Hector, and remarking that he “now feels safer in [] him and then when Hector came near burning the ships”

In the Odyssey similarly, when the maiden daughter of Alsinuous, Nausicaa, in conducting the uncouth stranger Odysseus, to the city of her father, we catch glimpses of a Tis who very nearly approaches the character of a Mr. Grundy, with the element of spiteful gossip added. The fidelity with which Tis reflects public opinion is further seen in the fact that his solicitude for the rights of man is not strong enough to counteract his natural disposition to exult over the fellow. Thersites was a common man who presumed to speak his mind among his betters, when one of them, Odysseus dealt him a smart blow on the back and caused him to resume his seat in tears. Tis laughed for joy, saying substantially that it served Thersites right, and that he probably would not do it again. The obedient sentiment of this passage makes it well worth quoting.

One word further; if I do not seem to load the Budget with too much musty material – After the age which gave birth to the great epics, an interval elapsed before we again catch the distinct echoes of a popular voice. Our Homeric friend Tis is silent, or [], to

be more exact. Tis ceases to speak in his own character as the nameless representative of the multitude, and begins to speak in a new quality of the multitude and begins to speak in a new quality. The individual mind now comes to express itself in forms of poetry which are essentially personal, interpreting the feelings and beliefs of the poet himself. In the lyric age, Tis emerges from the dim crowd and appears as the [lame] school master, Tyrtæus, stirring the Spartans with rousing elegy, to hear his councils; or as Sappho honoring her passion in [] lyrics, or as Pindar leaving his thoughts with those magnificent odes which glorify the heroes and athletes of Greece. It is Tis unmasked.

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