

**STUDIES IN GERMAN LITERATURE.
LESSING: A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF
HIS LIFE AND WRITINGS WITH
REPRESENTATIVE SELECTIONS,
INCLUDING NATHAN THE WISE**

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GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING.

Studies in German Literature

LESSING

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF HIS LIFE AND WRITINGS

WITH REPRESENTATIVE SELECTIONS, INCLUDING

NATHAN THE WISE

With Notes

By EURETTA A. HOYLES

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY WILHELM BERNHARDT, Ph.D.

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*Ich habe nie verlangt,
Dass allen Bäumen eine Rinde wachse.*

LESSING



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1895

P R E F A C E.

LITERATURE, as the most direct expression of the world's thought, is an undivided stream. The Sanscrit, Greek, and Latin, the Romance and Germanic languages swell the current of its richness. Each period has represented, more or less consciously, in its books, habits of thought and stages of mental development. The recognition of this universal character of literature is a help in studying any of its branches, and the reading of the masterworks of foreign languages in connection with one's own is a help in the appreciation of the latter. Emerson has justly said, —

"To know one element, explore another,
And in the second reappears the first."

Only in the original text does the reader see the precise value of the words chosen ; only there does he see the thought as it imaged itself to the writer's vision. Yet it must always remain true that foreign classics will be read largely in translation. The following brief essay is intended to make clear to English readers the work, time, and character of Lessing, the pioneer of modern German writing. It is intended to set forth the

steps in his own development, and to show how he made possible the success of Goethe and Schiller.

As such, this book, one of a series of German studies, is offered as reading matter in high schools. It is believed to be suitable also for literature classes that desire a knowledge of the German classics.

EURETTA A. HOYLES.

ANN ARBOR, MICH.,
October, 1895.

INTRODUCTION

THE Reformation of the Church in Germany, with its polemic spirit, had created a strong prose-style, but it had not been favorable to a purely æsthetic and poetic development, since fancy and imagination were not stimulated in the disturbed atmosphere of the religious disputes of the sixteenth century. In the footprints of the Reformation followed the Thirty Years' War,—that fearful struggle during which Germany was reduced to a wilderness and flung back at least a century in the march of civilization. As the star of the old German Empire set, that of France rose, politically and intellectually, spreading its light and influence over all Europe, and not least over downtrodden Germany and her literature, where French fashions, French tastes and thoughts, and even the French language, soon ruled supreme. French actors occupied the German theatres for nearly a hundred years, and French classics found a sympathetic reception among the refined classes of Germany,—above all, in Prussia, where the great Frederick gathered French writers about him.

Very slowly Germany recovered from the long exhaustion to which the religious wars had doomed her. At last, an era of literary reform began to dawn. A num-

ber of honest, patriotic, and thinking men felt keenly the blame encountered by their predecessors for having borrowed from French models. Then appeared the great scholar, resolute man, and lifelong enemy of everything that looked like tyranny, GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING. Possessed of the strongest passion for positive truth, and ever ready for controversy, he directed his critical attacks against every one of the mediocre writers at home and abroad. The literary works of his youth, though bearing the stamp of all the defects of his time, placed him at once above the most celebrated contemporary authors. His "Litteraturbriefe" made him the founder of a new and more dignified criticism; at the same time he uprooted the literary weeds that hitherto had grown profusely upon German soil, and prepared the field for a new and glorious harvest. Then returning to poetry, he created his "Sarah Sampson" and his "Philotas," two dramas grown upon the ground tilled by his own hands. Thus having firmly established in German poetry the "Familien-Tragoedie," he entered upon a broader and wider range. He presented his people with "Minna von Barnhelm" and "Emilia Galotti;" by which he made himself the founder of the true national drama. Restless and indefatigable, he soon employed all his energy and critical power in keen investigations into art in general, the result of which was the introduction, by means of his "Laocoön," of a new theory of æsthetics. At the same time, his "Hamburgische Dramaturgie" put an end to the unwarranted domination of French thought and taste upon the German stage. In his "Fragmente" he ventured upon the religious domain, and continued the work so gloriously begun by Luther;

he became the founder of a rational conception of religious doctrines. Finally, in his "Nathan der Weise" and in his "Erziehung des Menschengeschlechtes," he taught mankind the gospel of true humanity and religious toleration, of which his own blameless life is the practical application.

Lessing is one of the most eminent men of Germany. The English historian, Macaulay, calls him "the greatest critic of Europe;" and G. H. Lewes says of him: "Lessing is one of the greatest critics the world ever saw, and, beyond doubt, the greatest prosaist of Germany." In a similar manner, Goethe once expressed his opinion of Lessing, when he remarked: "Lessing repudiated the title of genius, but his works bear testimony against this." Summing up all the varied phases of Lessing's activity, it is safe to assert that he is the genuine type of German mind, and the perfect exponent of all the praiseworthy qualities of the German people.

Twenty years after Lessing, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was born; and ten years after the latter, Friedrich Schiller.

Schiller and Goethe, the two master-minds of Germany, both so great and so closely united in aim and friendship, and yet so different from each other! Schiller was born in humble circumstances, and lived in poverty for many years; he had to wait long, and had to undergo many trials and struggles before a ray of happiness brightened his path. To add to his troubles, his health early began to fail, and at the age of forty-five he was called away from this world, where he was loved so much. To Goethe, on the other hand, a happier fate was reserved. In the most favorable outward circum-