

**HEATH'S MODERN  
LANGUAGE  
SERIES. ATALA**

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Heath's Modern Language Series. Atala by François-René de Chateaubriand & Oscar Kuhns

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**FRANÇOIS-RENÉ DE CHATEAUBRIAND & OSCAR KUHNS**

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CHATEAUBRIAND

After the Portrait by Girodet (1809).

**Heath's Modern Language Series**

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**A T A L A**

BY

**CHATEAUBRIAND**

*EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION, NOTES AND  
A VOCABULARY*

BY

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## INTRODUCTION\*

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It would be an attractive task if one had the necessary time and knowledge to investigate the subject of the rise, growth and decline of literary reputations. Many interesting facts, and perhaps some important principles of criticism might thus be brought to light. Few authors illustrate more strikingly the vicissitudes of such a reputation than Chateaubriand, the great leader of French Romanticism. During the early part of his career, he was regarded as the greatest literary genius in France, and was looked up to and imitated by the writers of the new Romantic school, upon whom his

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\* *Biography*.—François-René de Chateaubriand was born at Saint-Malo, September 4, 1768. After a lonely youth passed in Brittany, he came to Paris at the age of twenty, and made his first essay in literature. In 1791, he made a voyage to America, but returned to France at the news of the flight and capture of Louis XVI. He was soon forced to flee, and went to England, where he wrote his *Essai historique sur les Révolutions* (1796), in which are reflected his bitterness, discontent and pessimism. Touched by the death of his mother, he experienced a change of heart, and on his return to France, published his *Génie du Christianisme*, the influence of which in the restoration of religious faith in France can hardly be overestimated. In 1806 he made an extensive trip to Greece and the Holy Land in order to obtain local color for his prose epic, *Les Martyrs*. During the Restoration he became interested in politics, and served at various times as

influence was practically boundless. Everywhere in the works of Lamartine, Vigny, Musset, and Victor Hugo, we find reminiscences of the thoughts, ideas, sentiments and style of Chateaubriand. And yet of the vast amount of writing left by him, the largest part has sunk into half-oblivion, known only to the special student. To-day *Atala*, *René*, and selections from *Les Martyrs* and the *Itinéraire* alone are read by the general public.

The character of Chateaubriand is of the utmost importance in understanding his literary work, which in common with the general tendency of all Romantic writers is marked by an excessive subjectivity. René, Chactas, and all the rest of his heroes are none other than the author himself, and everywhere we see his hand in prefaces, notes, critical remarks, and *pièces justificatives*. Probably no other writer ever lived who so persistently thrust his own personality on the notice

ambassador to Berlin, London, and, under Charles X, to Rome. His literary work during this period is largely political and controversial. During the last years of his life he was engaged on his *Mémoires d'outre Tombe*, which he sold to the publishers for an annuity of 20,000 francs, for himself, and one of 12,000 for his wife after his death. He died July 4, 1848.

The principal works of Chateaubriand are *Atala* (1801), the *Génie du Christianisme* (1802), of which *Atala* originally formed a part,—*René* (1805), *Les Martyrs* (1809), the *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811), and the posthumously published *Mémoires d'outre Tombe*. For further information regarding Chateaubriand the student may consult the following books: Lescure, *Chateaubriand (in Grands Ecrivains Français)*; Benoît, *Chateaubriand et ses Oeuvres*; Bourdoux, *Chateaubriand (Collection de classiques Populaires)*; Sainte-Beuve, *Chateaubriand et son Groupe Littéraire*.



of the reader. Truth compels us to say that the character of Chateaubriand was not an attractive one, as far as we can judge of it from the events of his life and from his own writings. It is marked by vanity, unrestrained sentimentality, affectation, and a certain kind of morbid sensuousness. He was melancholy and discontented, and the later years of his career were marked by peevish complaints of ill-treatment at the hands of his critics. The early circumstances of his life in the lonely château de Combourg called out his natural tendency to brooding, which by constant cultivation, developed into unrestrained emotionalism. This is largely the cause of Chateaubriand's worst faults as a writer; believing as he did that feeling is the all-important thing, he cultivated this at the expense of other requisites of literary composition. Everywhere he sought, — not clear thoughts or convincing arguments, — but picturesque descriptions, poetic rhapsodies, and melancholy reflections on the vanity of life.

Although a consummate master of style, he lacked restraint, moderation, and system in the use of his materials. Few writers show such a confused mass of ideas, descriptions, and reflections, tumbled together pell-mell, as Chateaubriand. The *Génie du Christianisme* has no thread of argument running through it, but is a jumble of disquisitions on all sorts of subjects, — Christian institutions, nature, poetry, art, chivalry and missions, while *Les Natchez*, partly prose epic poem, partly novel, is a most amazing wilderness of literary extravagance.

It is in the picturesqueness and the luxuriant opulence of his style that Chateaubriand can claim the title

of a great writer. His command over language was almost unlimited, and many of his descriptions are unsurpassed to-day. Here too we may look for an explanation of his wonderful success and influence. All this wealth of description, unknown to the age of Louis XIV., came as a revelation to the early 19th century. Although Rousseau and St. Pierre had led the way, Chateaubriand was the first to introduce the reign of description. From him date to a large extent local color and poetic prose. He went through life with an eye single to picturesque effects; for this he made journeys to America and the Orient, and the material there gathered was a mine out of which he drew the subject matter of nearly all his books. It is surprising to see how often he makes use of the same scene or description. This passion for description is applied to ruins, customs, cathedrals, and the monuments of the Middle Ages; but the chief field is that of nature. The remarkable development of a feeling for this in France received a strong additional impulse from him.

The deep undercurrent of melancholy in the literature of the early 19th century is a very striking phenomenon, and spread like a disease over all Europe. It is beyond doubt that Chateaubriand helped largely to spread it. The established type of the *homme fatal* was René, whose story is told in the book of the same name, wherein we see him the victim of morbid yearnings, of constant brooding and unrestrained emotion, the foreordained victim of fate.

From the above remarks it will be seen that some knowledge of Chateaubriand is necessary for the student of French literature. While other of his books are more

characteristic, none is so suited for general reading as *Atala*. In the first place this alone (with *René*), has survived the flood of years; to-day it occupies in French literature a popularity equal to that of "Paul and Virginia." It has been published in every conceivable form, from the small pocket edition to the superb quarto illustrated by Doré, and has been translated into nearly every civilized tongue. It not only illustrates nearly all the characteristic features of Chateaubriand's own genius, but if the student, while reading this little book, will compare it carefully with what he has read of the 17th century writers, he will have gone a long way toward a knowledge of that striking phenomenon of modern European literature, — Romanticism.

O. K.

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