

**BRUNETIÈRE'S
ESSAYS IN FRENCH
LITERATURE**

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Brunetière's essays in French literature by Ferdinand Brunetière & D. Nichol Smith

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FERDINAND BRUNETIÈRE & D. NICHOL SMITH

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BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS
IN
FRENCH LITERATURE

A SELECTION
TRANSLATED BY D. NICHOL SMITH

*WITH A PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR
Specially Written for this, the Authorised English Translation*

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P R E F A C E

THE few essays, selected from many others to form the present volume, have this in common, that all aim more or less at the determination of the 'essential character' of French literature. I use this word in the sense it bears in natural history, and the 'essential character' of a literature is that which separates it or distinguishes it from all other literatures.

In truth, a great literature, such as the French or the English, so old, so rich, so diverse, and with each successive epoch showing such differences, cannot well accept a single formula and allow itself to be imprisoned, as it were, within its narrow bounds. We must always beware of formulæ, and perhaps nowhere

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more so than in history or in literature, in which we usually preserve the recollection only of what is the exception. The world knows only one Dante and one Shakespeare, and this is the very reason why they are Shakespeare and Dante. In the same way if certain traits suggest a definition of the genius of Bossuet, for example, this is the reason why they cannot express the genius of Molière. And so at first sight nothing seems more futile than to try to include Molière and Bossuet in a common definition.

But when, instead of comparing them only among themselves, we compare them with others, and especially with foreigners,—the author of the *École des Femmes* with that of the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, and Bossuet with the learned Tillotson,—the family likeness which had escaped us becomes evident.

Facies non omnibus una
Nec diversa tamen.

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It is therefore in no wise futile to aim at detecting, at grasping, at fixing this family likeness. It becomes more definite, when, not content with having fixed it, we analyse it. And it is at last determined if we widen the field of comparison, and, instead of confining ourselves to the work of a few writers, apply ourselves to a whole epoch, a whole century, or the entire history of a whole literature. However much they differ, French writers resemble each other much more than they resemble English writers.

This is what I have endeavoured to show in the following *Essays*.

My object has been to point out that, of all the great modern literatures, French literature, which is much nearer the Latin than the Greek, has had as its 'essential character' a constant tendency, an original aptitude, for *sociability*. Few Frenchmen have written for themselves, for themselves alone, to assume

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the position of opposition, as the philosophers say; but their ambition has been to please, in the noblest sense of the word, to contribute by their writing to the improvement or to the comfort of civil life, or to displease, when they have dared to do so, in a manner yet pleasant. Or, in other words, if literature has anywhere been the expression of society, it is in France; and this is the reason of the fecundity, renewed from age to age by the very changes of society; of the universality, the acknowledged clearness, since authors have endeavoured to make themselves accessible to everybody; of some of the weaknesses too, on which in this *Preface* I may be allowed not to insist.

No more need I insist on the interest of this investigation. Criticism and literary history are not sciences, nor even 'scientific,' but they may yet avail themselves of scientific methods, and in a certain measure they can, like science,