

**ON THE INTERPRETATION
OF EMPEDOCLES; A
DISSERTATION**

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On the Interpretation of Empedocles; A Dissertation by Clara Elizabeth Millerd

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OF EMPEDOCLES; A
DISSERTATION**

The University of Chicago
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ON THE INTERPRETATION OF
EMPEDOCLES

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS
AND LITERATURE IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
(DEPARTMENT OF GREEK)

BY

CLARA ELIZABETH (MILLER)

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PREFATORY NOTE

In its original form this study included a series of notes on the fragments of Empedocles, discussing the meaning of doubtful passages, and examining in detail the important interpretations hitherto proposed. In order to reduce the whole to reasonable compass these notes have been omitted, though the wide range of divergent interpretations was interesting and highly instructive.

To the courtesy of Mr. Fred C. Conybeare I owe the valuable hints recorded on p. 62, toward the interpretation of a vexed passage of Philo.

To Professor Paul Shorey I wish gratefully to acknowledge my indebtedness both for the subject of this study and for many helpful criticisms and suggestions.

To the following well-known works reference will be made simply by the name of the author. If other works by the same writer are cited, the titles will be given.

REFERENCES

- BEARE: *Greek Theories of Elementary Cognition.*
BURNET: *Early Greek Philosophy.*
DIELS: *Vorsokratiker.* (Diels's numbering of the fragments of the pre-Socratics is followed, where not otherwise specified.)
GOMPERZ: *Griechische Denker.*
KARSTEN: *Empedoclis Agrigentini Carm. Reliquiae.*
MULLACH: *Philosophorum Graecorum Fragmenta.*
ROHDE: *Psyche.*
STEIN: *Empedoclis Agrigentini Fragmenta.*
TANNERY: *Pour l'histoire de la science hellène.*
WINDELBAND: *Geschichte der alten Philosophie.*
ZELLER: *Geschichte der griechischen Philosophie.* (Vol. I, when not otherwise specified.)

The references to the Aristotelian commentators cite the pages of the Berlin edition, unless otherwise specified.

INTRODUCTION

In all departments of historical and philological criticism of the present day, the influence of the evolutionary point of view is apparent in the intense interest shown in the beginnings of human effort. Attention is now focused, not upon the great periods of fulfilment, but upon the times of groping and of early promise. In Greek philosophy this tendency has centered attention upon the pre-Socratics, in whom the fundamental conceptions of thought are seen in the process of making. But man has cared as little as does Nature to preserve his first bungling attempts to bring order out of chaos, and only fragments and scattered notices of this group of thinkers remain to us. Marvelous constructive work has been done in the attempt to restore what was lost. The language of the fragments that have come down to us has been criticized, corrected, and emended, until Diels's *Vorsokratiker* presents us with a remarkably satisfactory text. The secondary authorities have been searched for references and allusions, until the student has ready access to almost all the information we possess upon early philosophy. Criticism has undertaken further the task of piecing together this material, the task not only of making a single whole out of all that we know of each system, but of relating these systems to one another, and of attempting to gain a unified view of the entire epoch. It would be difficult to overrate the value of the work that has been done, yet surprising disagreement prevails among the best critics and historians of philosophy, even upon very fundamental points. The purpose of the present study is to get at the sources of this disagreement in the interpretation of one of this group of thinkers, Empedocles, and to bring into juxtaposition the various possibilities in the solution of the important problems, and thus to contribute to a more stable reconstruction of his thought. Writers upon Empedocles, and upon pre-Socratic thought in general, have worked too much in isolation; have taken too little account of each other's results. A fuller knowledge of the work of other critics would furnish a most wholesome corrective of the tendency toward venturesome conjecture. As soon as an adequate notion is gained of the range of divergent interpretations, assurance is greatly lessened in new hypotheses supported by nothing save the absence of conflicting testimony. There is value in the attempt to face the precise results given by a fair examination of the evidence, without effacing contradictions or filling in gaps in our data by unsupported assumptions. Aristotle found Empedocles' thought at times unsatisfying because

of its omissions, its inconsistencies, and perhaps also its superficiality. We should expect philosophy at this stage in human development to present these characteristics. We should expect to find concepts ambiguous, ill-defined, often shifting in their meaning. Most of the criticism not only of Empedocles, but of all the thinkers of this period, has assumed in them far too great a degree of consistency and clearness of definition. It is true that the Greeks were a people with a genius for clear-cut distinctions and for precision of thought. Otherwise they would never have created a philosophy at all, much less a philosophy which included and defined the main concepts of all subsequent European thinking until the present time. But this power of clear definition was not present from the first; the same tentative blundering is to be found in this realm as in sculpture, where an equal precision and clearness of definition were ultimately attained. It is impossible to deny the helplessness of the early attempts in plastic art, though we may seek to find in them the germ of later achievement. Early philosophy in its fragmentary state is so susceptible of forced and figurative interpretation, of utter reversal of meaning by ingenious emendation of text or reconstruction of context, that it has not carried with it the same immediate proof of its relative crudity, and modern criticism has sought in it not only the promise of future greatness, but a degree of clearness and consistency not to be found in Plato or Aristotle. It has seemed to assume that philosophy sprang from the brain of man, as her patron goddess from the head of Zeus, full-grown.

This tendency has been bound up with the inclination to view early philosophy as a self-developing dialectic, isolated from the influence of everyday experience and everyday modes of thought. It is better perhaps to over-emphasize the continuity of philosophy, than to treat each thinker as an individual isolated from those who went before him, but we can never hope to understand the perennial freshness and vitality of Greek thought unless we realize that it has its roots in constant contact with the fruitful soil of daily experience. Its history is to be viewed rather as a process of clarifying the confused but always significant notions of ordinary thought, than as a progressive creation of notions of its own with which to organize experience. This process, we may know beforehand, must be a very gradual one. Reflection becomes only very slowly aware of its own implications, and admits from common life notions so vague and shifting that later criticism cannot tolerate their presence and tasks its ingenuity to spirit them away. Even in the maturest minds we find constant employment of notions supposed to be clear simply because long familiar; we find distinctions newly drawn lapsing from memory; we find ideas shifting

their meaning unconsciously in passing from one phase of a subject to another; we find survivals of childish modes of thought amid most profound discoveries. Much more should we expect to find these features in the beginnings of philosophic reflection. Distinctions seem inevitable, once made. We find it hard to believe that men could ever have painted the eye full front and the face profile, yet the understanding of the beginnings of human effort in any realm requires the power to reconstruct in imagination the efforts of the past without employing distinctions subsequently made.

To these difficulties of interpretation are added, in the case of Empedocles, the especial problems set by the employment of highly poetic and imaginative imagery which nearly always obscures the meaning. The use of this imagery constitutes indeed a presumption that the thought is not over precise. Thought does not reach clear and accurate conceptions before command of language has been obtained, and unless the poet deliberately chose to conceal his thought, his ideas must be regarded as subject to the same limitations as his diction. It is conceivable that Empedocles should at times choose picturesque imagery to capture the ears of his hearers. Were his thought precise and abstract, however, he would surely, like Parmenides, often lapse into more logical modes of expression. We may well believe that much which seems to us consciously figurative was by the poet meant as statement of fact. It would be strange indeed if the mythological mode of conceiving the universe were completely abandoned from the very inception of philosophic thinking.

Quite apart from the question of the worth of the mythological point of view—and it certainly embraces truths that scientific eras have sometimes overlooked—it is not reasonable to suppose that a tendency so deeply rooted in the Greek nature could disappear otherwise than gradually. In so early a period as the one we are considering it must still have had profound influence. Present-day thought can hardly achieve a sympathetic relation with the mind of Empedocles at this point. The scientific way of looking at things has so effectively wrought itself into the fabric even of our instinctive thinking that we naturally regard as figurative and symbolical much that the poet meant literally. Only by conscious effort can we realize that personal qualities could be ascribed to any aspects of nature or that logical and imaginative motives could really be so interwoven as they are in Empedocles. In these respects Aristotle already belongs to a totally different world. In him begin the Procrustean methods of reducing this mobile and picturesque system to technical formulation. Aristotle's many and recurring perplexities are prophetic of the difficulties modern criticism