

SEMITIC LEGENDS, A PAPER; THE STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE, A LECTURE; THE INFLUENCE OF ARTISTIC RACES, AN ADDRESS; ON THE PROVERBS OF EUROPEAN NATIONS; THE MEN WHO HAVE INFLUENCED MODERN GERMAN THOUGHT, A PAPER; AND OTHERS

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L. BENAS

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SEMITIC LEGENDS.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE

LITERARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY OF LIVERPOOL.

NOVEMBER 3RD, 1873.

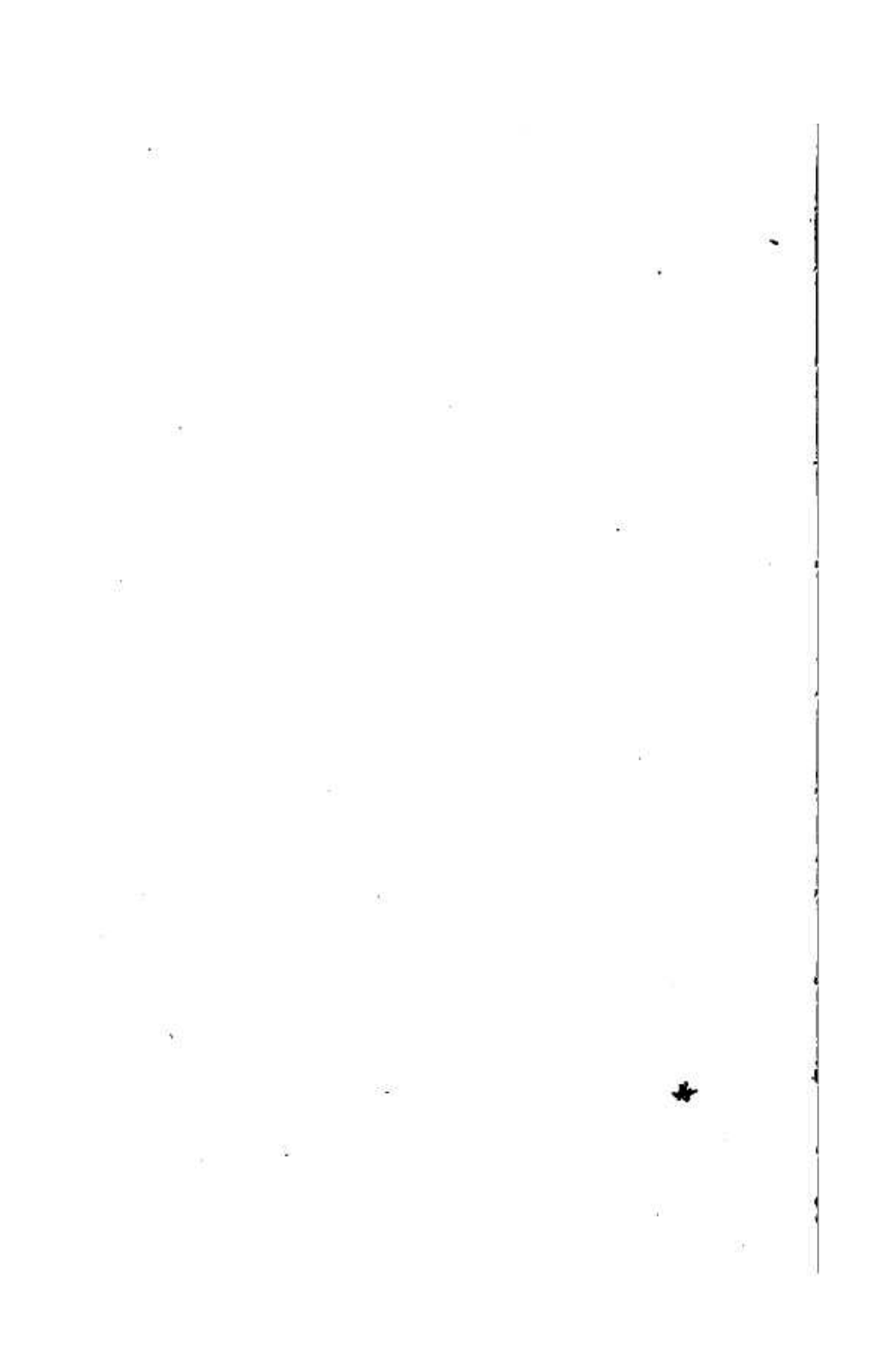
BY

BARON L. BENAS.

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I DEDICATE THIS ESSAY

TO THE

MEMORY OF MY DEAR SISTER

LOUISA.

HER VOICE, THOUGH HUSHED IN SILENCE, TO ME

SPEAKETH YET.

B. L. B.

SEMITIC LEGENDS.

THE more cultivated a people become, the more they venerate legends of olden time; not that they accept their utterances as truthful. The very term Legend draws a very broad line between it and History; yet from the origin of recorded time until this day mankind are apt to accept tales and phrases of their heroes and heroines which, if not actually vouched by historic fact, yet from surrounding circumstances lead to the belief that the words are suited to the characters of the persons who are connected with them. Thus "L'état c'est moi" has been put into the mouth of Louis XIV. "Soldiers, thirty centuries look down upon you," are given as the words of Napoleon at the Pyramids. Nelson is supposed to have uttered, "A peerage, or Westminster Abbey"; and Wellington himself never recollected to have exclaimed, "Up, Guards, and at them!" Even the beautiful episode of Highland Jessie at Lucknow, it is very much to be feared, is quite mythical. Thus we see that even at comparatively recent periods legendary creepers have wound themselves round the truthful trunk of history; and yet it is hinted in many quarters, and especially in the Encyclopædic school of French masters, that when legends ceased civilisation began.

No phrase is more frivolously used than the word "civilisation." We talk of civilised peoples, civilised states, civilised cities, civilised men, and civilised manners, and yet it is the most difficult task for the historian or archaeologist to point out when civilisation really commenced.

Was Egypt, was Assyria, were Babylon, Palestine, Greece, or Rome civilised? Were Mexico and Peru civilised nations? Is civilisation the self-denial of the many for the benefit of the many? Is it the clustering of human beings in a given radius? Is it the taming down of the brutal instincts of the animal, and the raising up the level of humanity to the model of the ideal? If so, what is the ideal? And is there one ideal, or are there many ideals? And does the conflict of ideals produce harmony, or is there but one ideal only?

We find in nature the tree, the shrub, the flower, clumps and grasses; there are fields and fens, rock and hill and dale; the brook, the river, and the ocean. A combination of all these objects in nature we call a beautiful landscape. We go to the desert, and find an interminable sameness, a vista of sand without end, without variety, an eternity of equality, and we call it a wilderness. It seems, then, we call an eternal oneness and endless repetition, a continued and unceasing multiplication of one and the same matter, a wilderness or a wilderness.

What do we term harmony in music? Is it the eternal braying of a horn, or the continued strumming of a string, or the ceaseless beating of a drum? We call this discord. The combination of the reed, the string, the horn, the drum, — the blending of sounds each differing in itself, but all working under a single conductor for the same results, — produces what we term sweet sound and harmony.

Is it one people alone, then, that contributes to the civilisation of mankind; or the many, each working in that particular sphere to which it was best adapted by the Creator of Nature?

Now it has been the habitual tendency of writers and thinkers of various schools of thought totally to ignore the claims of Semitic literature and culture as one of the

workers in the cause of the education of mankind. The monastic authors knew nothing of Semiticism, except that which they obtained through the medium of the Greek and Latin writers, whilst the Voltarian and Encyclopædic schools of literature looked upon Semiticism as a huge imposture from beginning to end, and vented their spleen upon that literature because they were the authors, they assert, of all that was antagonistic to true culture. Thus, like many great pioneers, Semiticism has seen its views adopted without its name being even recognised in the great work of culture, even as we now see the New World discovered by an indomitable perseverance, and brought to light by the brilliant genius of a Columbus, who is denied the just tribute which mankind might have awarded in naming the great continent after him. We find, however, in reality that whilst only a small district is named Columbia the whole continent goes down to futurity with the name of Amerigo, an obscure and undeserving stranger.

It is asserted, on the contrary, that Greece is the mother of all that is good and beautiful. Yet, it may be asked, was not Hellas beautiful? Indeed she was very beautiful. Her language was superb, her sculptures were unequalled, her paintings marvellous. No epic poem has excelled that of Homer. No lyrics are more charming than those of Pindar and Anacreon. No dramas are more soul-stirring than those of Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; nor are there more interesting writers than Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon. There is no orator even who has excelled Demosthenes.

Yet, I boldly assert, the world loves not Greece. I use the word "love" advisedly, in its purer and holier sense. We do certainly love Grecian poetry and Grecian art, as a youth might love a lascivious beauty; he may be enraptured with her wiles, intoxicated by her grace, and enslaved by her charms.