

**"KNOW THYSELF" IN
GREEK AND
LATIN LITERATURE: A
DISSERTATION**

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"Know Thyself" in Greek and Latin Literature: A Dissertation by Eliza Gregory Wilkins

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ELIZA GREGORY WILKINS

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PREFACE

The Delphic maxim "Know Thyself" has occurred so frequently in the literature of every age from the fifth century B. C. down to our own day that it may seem at first thought too well-worn a theme for fresh discussion. But modern use of it, whether in the title of a book or a play, or in the incidental pointing of a moral in some literary work, takes little account, as a rule, of its ancient connotation; and no systematic attempt has been made hitherto to discover its meanings for the Greeks themselves. It has been the aim of this study to determine the sense in which the Ancients interpreted the maxim, by collecting the instances of its actual or implied presence in the extant writings of the Greeks and Romans down to about 500 A. D. It is possible that in covering so extensive a field some more or less important passages may have been overlooked, but they would probably not affect the categories indicated.

It is with sincere gratitude that I here acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor Paul Shorey of the University of Chicago for the subject of this investigation, and for many an illuminating suggestion during the progress of the work.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

When Socrates in Plato's *Protagoras*¹ is discussing certain verses of Simonides which refer to an apophthegm of Pittacus—Χαλεπὸν ἰσθλὸν ἔμμεναι, he explains that this is one of the numerous examples of the Old-time Wisdom, an instance of Laconian βραχυλογία, and he turns by way of illustration to the inscriptions at Delphi. "Thales the Milesian," he says, "and Pittacus the Mitylenian, and Bias the Prienian, and our Solon, and Cleobulus the Lindian, and Myson the Chenian, and the seventh—Lacedaemonian Chilon . . . met together and dedicated the first-fruits of wisdom to Apollo at the temple at Delphi, writing these sayings which are on everybody's tongue, Γνώθι σαυτὸν and Μηδὲν ἄγαν." While this passage raises no questions regarding the interpretation of γνώθι σαυτὸν, it may serve as a fitting introduction to a consideration of the Delphic inscriptions in general—their number, their authorship, and their exact location on the temple. Besides the two given above we know positively of three others—the Ἐγγύη, πᾶρα δ' ἄτη, mentioned by Plato in the *Charmides*,² by Diogenes Laertius³ and others; Θεῶ ἤρα, cited by Varro,⁴ and perhaps reflected in the "sequi deum" of Cicero's *De Finibus* III:22; and a large E, known to us chiefly through Plutarch's treatise entitled *De E ἀρού Δελφῶς*. The scholiasts on Lucian⁵ and on Dio Chrysostom⁶ give seven inscriptions, attributing one to each of the Seven Sages, and there is a manuscript⁷ in the Laurentian Library at Florence containing ninety-two sayings, which bears the title *Maxims of the Seven Sages Which Were Found Carved on the Pillar at Delphi*.⁸ The late scholiasts on Lucian and Dio Chrysostom, however, are hardly to be relied upon,⁹ and the

¹ 343 A-B.

² 165 A.

³ I, 3, 6 & IX, 11, 8.

⁴ *Sat. Menip.* XXIX, 16. Ed. Reise p. 130.

⁵ On *Phalar.* I, 7.

⁶ Quoted by Schultz in *Philologus* XXIV, p. 203, n. 62.

⁷ *Philologus* XXIV, p. 215.

⁸ τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς σαρῶν παραγγέλματα ἄνω εἰρήθησαν κεκολλημένα ἐπὶ τοῦ ἐν Δελφοῖς κίονος. See *Philologus* XXIV, p. 193 and pp. 215 ff. Mullach. *Frag. Phil. Graec.* Vol. I, p. 212 ff. brings together the apophthegms which ancient writers attributed to the Seven Wise Men severally and collectively.

⁹ *Philologus* XXIV, p. 203.

compiler of the *Παραγγέλματα* of the Wise Men was undoubtedly confused¹⁰ in assigning to Delphi so many sayings which are nowhere else mentioned as belonging there. So, too, according to Photius and Suidas, some people classed another proverb—the *την κατά σουτὸν Δία*—as a *Πυθικὸν ἀπόρρηγμα*, and with like error.

Modern discussion of the inscriptions at Delphi is concerned chiefly with the meaning of the *E* and with the arrangement of the sayings, certain scholars holding conservatively to the five known surely to have been there, and others seeking to find trace of enough more to make possible an arrangement in hexameters. The meaning of the letter *E* was evidently not clear to the men of later antiquity, as Plutarch's treatise shows. He gives in the main five possible explanations, two based on the supposition that the *E* is a real *E*, the fifth letter of the alphabet, and three on the supposition that it represents the diphthong *EI*. If the *E* is a simple *E*, he suggests that there were originally five Sages instead of seven and that this fifth letter registered a protest against the claims of the other two;¹¹ or again, that the *E* may have the mystical meanings connected with the number five.¹² If the letter represents the diphthong, he fancies that it may be the conjunction *ei*¹³ used in asking questions of the God—*if* one should marry, *if* one should go on a voyage, and the like; or the argumentative *if*,¹⁴ honored by a God who favored logic; or, further, that it may be the second person singular of the verb *εἶμι*¹⁵ and mean "Thou art"—the worshipper's recognition of the fact that God alone possesses true Being. This treatise of Plutarch's is the only ancient discussion of the *E* in our extant literature, and almost the only allusion to it,¹⁶ but the letter occurs on the recently discovered omphalos,¹⁷ and also on some coins of the time of Hadrian which represent the temple front.¹⁸

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 217.

¹¹ c. 3.

¹² c. 7 & 8. Cf. Athenaeus 453D—<Διφρα>, βῆτα, γάμμα, δέλτα, Θεῷ γὰρ εἰ, εἴη, ἦρα. . . .

¹³ c. 5.

¹⁴ c. 6.

¹⁵ c. 17.

¹⁶ Plut. *De def. orac.* 31, and a frag. of a Lexicon (See Bursian *Geog.* I, 175, note 5) refer to the *E*.

¹⁷ See *Year's Work in Classical Studies* for 1915, pp. 73-74.

¹⁸ Frazer on Pausanias X, 19, 4, Vol. V, p. 340. Also *Hermes* XXXVI, p. 476.