

**NATHAN THE WISE:
A DRAMATIC POEM**

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**GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING &
ELLEN FROTHINGHAM & KUNO FISCHER**

NATHAN THE WISE: A DRAMATIC POEM

William Gerry,

NATHAN THE WISE

A Dramatic Poem by

GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING

Translated by

ELLEN FROTHINGHAM

PRECEDED BY A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF
THE POET AND HIS WORKS
AND FOLLOWED BY AN
ESSAY ON THE POEM
BY KUNO FISCHER



NEW YORK:
LEYPOLDT & HOLT,
1868.

PUBLISHERS' NOTICE.

NATHAN THE WISE is the third of a uniform series of great foreign poems which the publishers have lately begun to issue. The first one was KING RENÉ'S DAUGHTER, from the Danish, which is now in the second edition. It was followed by FRITHIOF'S SAGA, the national epic of Sweden, edited by Bayard Taylor. The fourth of the series, SELECTIONS FROM THE KALEVALA, the national epic of Finland, translated from a close German version by the late Professor John A. Porter, of Yale College, will be ready for publication a few days after the issue of the present volume. Others will be added as rapidly as the public appreciation may warrant. Among those in contemplation are Calderon's LIFE IS A DREAM; TASSO'S AMINTA, translated by Leigh Hunt; THE WOOING OF THE KING'S DAUGHTER, from the Norwegian of Muench; BORIS GODOUNOFF, from the Russian of Pouschkine; NALA AND DANAJANTI,

translated from the Sanscrit by Milman; a translation of Bodenstedt's version of the Turkish songs of Mirza Schaffy, and an English version of the Sakoontalá.

With the exception of Goethe's *Faust*, there is no poem in German literature which has received so much special study as *NATHAN THE WISE*, or which has so well rewarded it. Probably the best critical monograph which it has generated is the essay by Kuno Fischer. This has been translated by the translator of the poem, pruned of some of its German redundancy, and put into a form better suited than the original one, to the Anglo-Saxon requirements of terseness and directness. The modified version will be found at the end of this volume.

SKETCH OF LESSING.

“ If God held all truth shut in his right hand, and in his left nothing but the ever-restless instinct for truth, though with the condition of for ever and ever erring, and should say to me, Choose! I would bow reverently to his left hand, and say, Father, give! Pure truth is for Thee alone!”

Two years ago, it would have been safe to say that a vague recollection of having somewhere seen a sentence like the one we have quoted, was all the knowledge of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing possessed by the majority of educated Americans. Of course there are men who have long known and appreciated him; but the number of such is surprisingly small. He has not had one reader where Goethe, or Schiller, or Jean Paul, has had a hundred. The only one of his works yet published in this country is *Minna von Barnhelm*—surely not his most characteristic production—and this was reprinted by a

publisher of school-books from an English edition adapted for the use of students of German. It is but a year since Mr. Spencer published Professor Evans' excellent translation of Stahr's *Life of Lessing*. The 'criticisms' which the volume received, clearly displayed the ignorance existing in regard to its subject. Among the few notable exceptions were a short notice in the *Nation*, and an article in the *North American Review* for April, 1867, by Professor Lowell, in which he gave an admirable sketch of Lessing's life and character. A 'Review,' published in New York, contained an 'essay,' the first half of which was translated from the *Nouvelle Biographie Générale*, and the other half taken from Appleton's *Cyclopædia*. As far as we have been able to learn, the American press has supplied little more than these meagre materials for a knowledge of that great and unique man.

The neglect that he has received cannot be accounted for by any proportionate inferiority to his better known countrymen. He was the generator of modern German literature, and it is not on the partly accidental position of a pioneer that his claims rest. He had a greatness of his own, whose half prophetic character does much to explain the neglect which has fallen upon it. The hackneyed term, "in advance of his age," has a very deep significance when applied to him. But we are beginning to catch up with him, and the peculiar

progress of our people has already made them specially fitted for his teachings.

For a knowledge of the poet and his other works, we recommend the sources already named. We have gleaned from them, for the benefit of readers unwise enough to slight this recommendation, the facts embodied in the following sketch.

On the 22d of January, 1729, Deacon, afterward Pastor Primarius, John Gottfried Lessing, of Kamenz, in Upper Lusatia, rejoiced, it is to be supposed, over the birth of his eldest son. The little Lessing began life with a line of ancestors at his back who, through scholarly attainments and liberal ideas, legitimately gave him the power which afterward made him great. For half-a-dozen generations, his family had been one of jurists, curates, and burgomasters. His grandfather's thesis, on taking his degree of Doctor of Laws, was, "*De Religionum Tolerantia.*" Added to the boy's other 'inherited conditions,' was a fine physical constitution.

When Lessing was about twelve years old, the rector of the Kamenz public school, where Lessing went, published an article defending the theme that "The Stage is a School of Eloquence." This brought all the big-wigs of the town down upon him. Pastor Primarius Lessing assailed his principles in the pulpit, and at last he had to leave the place. A friend of his—Mylius by name, whom

we shall meet again—wrote a satirical poem on the circumstance, in consequence of which he was imprisoned, forced to apologize, and fined. This affair probably presented the Stage for the first time to the notice of the future founder of the German drama. The immediate effect was, that he had to go to another school—that of St. Afra, established by the Elector Maurice of Saxony, in Meissen. On the 21st of June, 1841, a festival was held at that same school, in honor of the centennial anniversary of Lessing's entrance. The old pastor took him there to have him prepared for the ministry. After Lessing left, he said that he had "already at Meissen understood how one must learn much there which one cannot use in the world." That was more than a hundred years ago. Perhaps schools have changed since then. At Meissen, Lessing's favorite authors were Theophrastus, Plautus, and Terence, and he said that he got self-knowledge by reading "comedies." At this school he wrote parts of a poem "On the Plurality of Worlds." One expression in it is—"They make glorious shipwreck who are lost in seeking worlds." He also began his first dramatic work—a comedy—"The Young Scholar," of which he says that at that time, when he "knew men only from books, a young scholar was the only species of fool" which he could not have been unacquainted with.

In September, 1846, when he was seventeen years