

**SCHOOL LECTURES ON
THE
ELECTRA OF SOPHOCLES
AND MACBETH**

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School Lectures on the Electra of Sophocles and Macbeth by A. H. Gilkes

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INTRODUCTION.

IN this book are two sets of lectures, given at Shrewsbury to the sixth form. Each set has a tragedy for its subject: the first, the 'Electra' of Sophocles; the second, 'Macbeth.' It seems to me that the method which I have used is very suitable to all books which are read at schools.

I suppose that all boys are too apt to think of school books, whether they are in Latin, Greek, or English, as containing nothing which can amuse or please; and feeling this I have taken two plays, and tried to show the effect which it seems to me they are intended to produce.

I hope that the publication of these essays may in some degree serve education; but I publish them diffidently; and sadly, for I do not think that they offer to education the kind of help which it most needs. There are new books enough, perhaps too many; and a variety of new methods of teaching, at least sufficient to meet every need. Schools are full, and a great concern for their welfare is generally

professed; but all the while the condition of the most eminent of them is not satisfactory. Great evils exist in them, to remove which no real effort is made, or seems intended.

What I mean is soon said. Boys are entrusted to us that we may make them fit to do their duty in life; and, in the first place, we teach them generally not to work, but to play; or at least we allow play to assume that position in their thoughts which properly belongs to work; and secondly, their minds are filled at school with ideas which, if they are to be true men, they must unlearn.

As to what I said first, it is true that we still generally profess in school hours to expect diligence from our pupils. We still punish for idleness, and speak of learning as something which ought to be acquired; but all the while we entice boys to idleness by arrangements out of school, which destroy the effect both of our lectures and of our punishments. Eminence in athletic exercises is set before boys as a means whereby they may attain a most honourable and sufficient notoriety. Representatives of school athletics are made to feel that they have satisfied the purpose of their creation. The newspapers are curious about them, thoughtless people wholly applaud them, their parents shut their eyes to the future, and their masters, though they sometimes

complain, yet lose their resentment in the general satisfaction, and even accept thankfully the distinction which a promising young cricketer confers upon the place of education to which he belongs. Against such influences what chance has even a well-meaning boy? He goes to Lord's or Henley, or tries to make himself fit to go there, honestly believing that so he is receiving all the benefits of education. Everyone knows the good that results, to boys and masters and a school generally, from a moderate attention to athletics: but everyone should also know that to this attention there must be a limit; and I believe that everyone, who thinks about the matter, will consider that this limit has been reached, and passed.

The folly of this state of things will be apparent to most men, since it is not the fault of this age to be indifferent to that which mars a boy's chance of making money. Those only will not be impatient of it, who feel that they are rich enough to have their children spoiled.

But it seems likely that, in these days, a glory which is purely athletic will not keep the reputation of a school sweet for very long; and therefore something else must appear to satisfy inquiry. Hence scholarships are founded; scholarships, which have a pleasant name from the tradition that they are to help the needy, are founded to attract some clever

boys who may be expected to work, that the school to which they belong may be like a barrel organ, playing serious or secular tunes according to the neighbourhood. It seems hard that all the evils of cramming and competition should be forced upon these boys at their tender age, to save the credit of such a system of education as ours.

If the position of the greater number of the boys at a public school be considered with reference to the objects for which they attend school, it will not be found satisfactory. Contented idleness, which means generally greater mischief also, takes the place of diligence. I am well aware that it is not to be expected that boys will ever be fond of work: I say only that it ought not to be made more distasteful to them by the conditions under which they live at a public school. Or consider the condition of boys when they have left school, at the Universities for instance, where their characteristics are most easily seen. Here, at these seats of learning, it may be expected that the most satisfactory results of our work will be visible. Are the men at the Universities learned, diligent, respectful of learning? Are they not, in too large a proportion, extravagant, loud, obstinate in their attention to themselves and their amusements, and in their disregard of all useful learning?

I said also, in the second place, that the minds of boys are filled at school with ideas which, if they are to be true men, they must unlearn. I mean, that they are taught at school implicitly these two doctrines: firstly, that their advancement in life is their proper and sufficient aim; and secondly, that men are divided into castes, of which they belong to a high caste, and need only be scornful towards all others. A belief in these doctrines is easy and natural, and a master may find it useful as a motive power to which he may appeal. And yet the doctrines are not true, but most false. A master will teach best, if he has, besides a number of particular objects connected with each lesson which he gives, some notion of a general object which is to be the result of them altogether, some notion of the real end of education. But he cannot find it in doctrines such as I have just mentioned. It seems to me also that this end is improperly defined as 'self-knowledge,' and wrongly defined as 'the power of making a living.' The end of education is the same as the end of life, and that is, the subordination of self to the highest power that can be known. It is the introduction of self into a life that spoils it, that produces all ungracefulness, all quarrelling, and all vice; for, by introducing his self into his life, a man becomes self-conscious, greedy and conceited, and