

THE LOST TALES OF MILETUS

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The lost tales of Miletus by Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton

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SIR EDWARD BULWER LYTTON

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OF MILETUS**

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OF

MILETUS

BY THE RIGHT HON.

SIR EDWARD BULWER LYTTON, BART., M.P.

LONDON

JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET

1866

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PREFACE.

TIME has spared no remains, in their original form, of those famous Tales of Miletus, which are generally considered to be the remote progenitors of the modern Novel. The strongest presumption in favour of their merit rests on the evidence of the popularity they enjoyed both among Greeks and Romans in times when the imaginative literature of either people was at its highest point of cultivation. As to the materials which they employed for interest or amusement, we are not without means of reasonable conjecture. Parthenius, a poet, probably of Nicæa (though his birthplace has been called in dispute), who enjoyed a considerable reputation in the Augustan Age, and had the honour to teach Virgil Greek, has bequeathed to us a collection of short love-stories compiled from older and more elaborate legends. In making this collection he could scarcely fail to have

had recourse to sources so popular as the fictions of Miletus. Whatever might have been the gifts of Parthenius as a poet, he wastes none of them on his task of compiler. He contents himself with giving the briefest possible outline of stories that were then in popular circulation, carefully divesting them of any ornament of fancy or elegance of style. His work, dedicated to the Latin poet, Gallus, seems designed to suggest, from the themes illustrated by old tale-tellers, hints to the imitation or invention of later poets. And, indeed, Parthenius himself states that it was for such uses to Gallus that his book was composed. But what stories, thus reduced to the mere ashes of their pristine form, might have been when they took life and glow from the art of the practised tale-teller, the yet extant and animated romance of 'The Golden Ass,' by Apuleius, may enable us to guess. For though that romance, as well as the story of the 'Ass' by Lucian, is generally supposed to have been borrowed from the earlier work of Lucius of Patra, Apuleius implies that his manner of telling it is agreeable to that of the fictions most in vogue in his time, which were certainly the Milesian Fables, or those which the Sybarites imitated from that original. And if in 'The Golden Ass' we may really trace a distinguishable vestige of the manner in which the Milesian tale-tellers diversified and adorned their fables, they must have

ranged through a variety of interest—little less extensive than that in which the novelists of our day display the versatility of their genius,—embracing lively satire, prodigal fancy, and stirring adventure.

Out of such indications of the character and genius of the lost Milesian Fables, and from the remnants of myth and tale once in popular favour, which may be found, not only in such repertories of ancient legend as those of Apollodorus and Conon, but scattered throughout the Scholiasts or in the pages of Pausanias and Athenæus, I have endeavoured to weave together a few stories that may serve as feeble specimens of the various kinds of subject in which these ancestral tale-tellers may have exercised their faculties of invention. I have selected from Hellenic myths those in which the ground is not preoccupied, by the great poets of antiquity, in works yet extant; and which, therefore, may not be without the attraction of novelty to the general reader. In this selection I have avoided, of course, any of the more licentious themes, to which, it is to be feared, the Boccacios of Miletus sometimes stooped their genius; while I have endeavoured to take subjects which depended for the popularity they once enjoyed on elements congenial to art in every land and age; subjects readily lending themselves to narrative construction or dramatic situation, and capable of

that degree of human interest which is essential to the successful employment of all the more fanciful agencies of wonder.

I do not, however, assume the tales herein contained to be told in that primitive form of Milesian fiction of which we can only conjecturally trace the vestige. I have rather sought to place the myths upon which they are founded at that point of view from which they would have appeared to contemporaries of Apuleius in whom the vestige of Milesian fable must be principally explored;—a period during which stories derived from heathen myths passed, in re-narrating, through minds in which what is called the modern sentiment, more or less perceptibly, infused itself. I have no doubt that the lovely story of Cupid and Psyche, which forms the most poetical portion of ‘The Golden Ass,’ is of much remoter antiquity than the time of Apuleius; but the modern sentiment which delights in under currents of thought, and does not satisfy itself with modes of art wholly sensuous, prevails in Apuleius’s treatment of the story, and could not have been breathed into the fiction by any one who had not imbibed the spirit either of Christianity or of the later Platonists. In regarding, therefore, these fictions as if they were composed not by a contemporary of Sophocles nor even of Ovid, but by a contemporary of Apuleius, or of one of his less gifted successors in the

revival or re-adaptation of Greek romance, the author gains this advantage: the main difficulty in the treatment of classic myths by a modern writer, is materially lessened, if not wholly removed: for if the modern sentiment sometimes appears in the intimation of truths which underlie all fiction, it ceases to be an anachronism, and is critically appropriate to the period assumed for the composition of the story;—just as the mode in which Apuleius platonises the tale of Cupid and Psyche is proper to the time in which he lived, and the influences to which his imagination was subjected.

I must add a few words as to the form in which these narratives are cast. Although it is clear that the Milesian Tales were for the most part told in prose, yet it appears that Aristides, the most distinguished author of those tales whose name has come down to us, told at least some of his stories in verse. Dunlop, in the ‘History of Fiction,’ quotes verses from Ovid which seem to decide that question—

*Iunxit Aristides Milesia carmina secum,
Pulsus Aristides nec tamen urbe sua est.*

And the myths I have selected are essentially poetic, and almost necessarily demand that license for fancy to which the employment of rhythm allures the sanction of the reader, while it obtains his more ductile assent to the