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Character and Language of the Athenians

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CHARACTER AND LANGUAGE OF THE ATHENIANS.

It is seldom that in a language we can find any direct or minute indications of the character of its speakers. Certain broad generalisations may doubtless be made. A vigorous people will generally possess a vigorous and well-developed language, corresponding to their physical and mental calibre, while the tongue of a barbarous and degraded tribe will probably give indications of similar linguistic degradation.

But when we come to examine languages more closely, it is generally impossible to find any clear or marked signs of the peoples who speak them, in any particular linguistic characteristics. This being so, the fact that in the Greek language there is a curious exception

to the general principle is the more remarkable, while the very rarity of the occurrence makes the phenomenon of peculiar interest.

The point to which I refer is this. *In the Greek language there has been a complete and radical degradation meaning in the case of all words connected with the idea of labour or toil*, a degradation which, so far as I am aware, is unparalleled in any other language. Whatever may be the explanation of this remarkable phenomenon, the fact itself will scarcely be disputed after examination, though its significance may possibly admit of diverse interpretations. The following table illustrates in a concrete form the phenomenon referred to:—

πόνος (toil): adj. πονηρός (with degraded meaning, wicked)	
μόχθος (toil): adj. μοχθηρός („ „ „ „)	
μόγος (toil): adj. μογερός („ „ „ wretched)	
πανούργος (p. πᾶν ἔργον) (with degraded meaning, knavish)	
ἄθλιος (fr. ἄθλον contest) („ „ „ wretched)	
τλήμων (fr. τλάω endure) („ „ „ wretched)	
σχήλιος (orig. meaning, 'unflinching') („ „ „ wretched)	
φορτικός (fr. φέρω bear) („ „ „ vulgar).	

It is impossible to read the classical authors of ancient Greece without noticing the frequent use of these words in their degraded signification; and there are one or two examples which are conspicuous above the rest. Thus in the *Antigone* of Sophocles (l. 74), *Antigone*—in signifying the fixed purpose to set the law of God above the law of man, and, notwithstanding Creon's cruel edict, to give due burial rites to her brother Polynices—uses the striking phrase *ᾧσια πανουργήσασα*, where the degradation of the word *πανουργέω* is made particularly evident by the contrast with *ᾧσια*. Again, in the *Vespae*, l. 466, Aristophanes uses the expression *πόνῳ πονηρός*, in the signification of utterly rascally, where the collocation of the noun *πόνος* from which the adjective is itself derived, makes the degradation in meaning of that adjective all the more striking. Other examples might be found in abundance in the writings of any classical

author, and the question naturally arises, 'To what causes is this unique and curious phenomenon due?'

In the first place, it should be observed that this constant degradation in meaning of words connected with the idea of toil or endurance is almost invariably found in Attic writers, the bulk of Greek literature being of Athenian origin. To what exact extent the usage prevailed in other parts of Greece it would be difficult to determine, but in any case it seems reasonable to suppose that, however wide-spread it may have been, it owed its origin to Athenian sources.

At first sight an obvious explanation of the phenomenon referred to might seem to lie in the actual construction of Athenian society at the time when Athens was at the zenith of her power. Besides the ordinary Athenian citizen, with his full rights of franchise and citizenship, Athens contained a large servile population, whose duty it was to

minister to the wants of their free masters and to remove from their leisure hours all necessity of sordid toil. The fact that all the menial tasks of the city were performed by an alien and a slave population might naturally to some extent cause a distaste for mere manual labour, and at the same time bring about an attitude of loathing and contempt for work that was the habitual and involuntary prerogative of the slave. But tempting as this explanation might seem at first sight, it seems doubtful whether it be sufficient to account for the facts, especially if we remember that an almost exactly similar state of circumstances prevailed in ancient Rome. As at Athens so at Rome the wants of the free-born citizens were ministered to by swarms of servile dependants, yet never even in Rome's most degraded days do we find any signs in the Latin language of doubts or aspersions being cast on the dignity of labour.

Even by the poets of the Empire manual labour was still regarded as a noble and an elevating pursuit. It is to the 'rusticorum mascula militum proles Sabellis docta ligonibus uersare glebus' that Horace looks for the soldiery who shall defend the rights and spread the name of Imperial Rome. And the heroes of Roman story, the names that were household words amongst the entire population, were men like Camillus and Cincinnatus, who left the plough to serve the State.

Again, notwithstanding the constant presence of a slave population in Rome, not only is there no sign or trace in the Latin language of any feeling of aversion to labour, but some of the noblest Latin words seem to point to a distinct tendency in the opposite direction. Compare such noble words as 'patientia' and 'perseverantia' with *πονηρός* and *ἄθλιος*, and the radical difference in tendency between the two languages is strikingly apparent. If to be subjected to toilsome endurance (*ἄθλον*) seemed to the Athenian to denote the unhappy man (*ἄθλιος*), to the Roman to go successfully through difficulties (*per severa*) still seemed the noblest perseverance (*perseverantia*). And the mere fact of a slave population having been indigenous in both cities is not

sufficient to account for a phenomenon which, while so conspicuous in the one language, is so conspicuous by its absence from the other.

It seems to me that the true explanation must lie, not in any outward circumstances, but in the actual character of the people. Of all nations that have ever attained to greatness, the story of the Athenian people is surely the most remarkable. Inhabiting a tiny domain, whose limits were scarcely larger than that of the small county of Lanarkshire, they nevertheless during a period of their career accomplished in every department of human activity such brilliant results as must for all time exercise an enduring influence on the character and civilisation of the human race. If we place the largest possible limits to that period, it cannot in any case be made to embrace a longer time than 150 years; for while 480 B.C. saw their rise to power with the brilliant naval victory of Salamis, the speech of Demosthenes De Corona in 330 B.C. may be regarded as the last dying cry of Athenian liberty. In that brief space the Athenians explored all the heights of human greatness. In war they defeated the formidable armaments of Asia, and by so doing rendered modern civilisation possible. In commerce they displayed unrivalled activity, and founded a system of banking which, largely copied by Rome, established the principles on which modern banking must for all time be based. In art, and especially in sculpture and architecture, they produced work which is alike the wonder and envy of the modern world. It is to them that nearly every branch of literature owes its origin. Tragedy and comedy, history and philosophy, are alike the productions of the wonderful genius of the Athenians; while the De Corona, the acknowledged masterpiece of oratorical effort, was given to the world from that same congenial soil.

But there must surely have been some radical and permanent flaw in the Athenian character to produce so sudden an eclipse in a marvellous and glorious career. The Athenian had every requisite and qualification of genius excepting the power of application, and this defect is clearly indicated in the

very language of the people by means of the phenomenon to which I have alluded.

Indeed, it is a curious and interesting fact that to some extent the Athenians seem to have recognised this tendency of their national character, and not to have regarded it as a defect. Two illustrations of this may be given from Thucydides. Thus in his celebrated oration, Bk. II. ch. 39, Pericles is made to say: 'καὶ ἐν ταῖς παιδείαις οἱ μὲν

ἐπιπόνῳ ἀσκήσει εὐθὺς νέοι ὄντες τὸ ἀνδρεῖον μετέρχονται, ἡμεῖς δὲ ἀνειμένως διαιτώμενοι οὐδὲν ἥσσον ἐπὶ τοὺς ἰσοπαλεῖς κινδύνους χωροῦμεν.' And again, in summarising the character of Themistocles (surely a typical Athenian), the historian says, Bk. I. ch. 138: 'καὶ τὸ ξύμπαν εἰπεῖν, φύσεως μὲν δυνάμει, μελέτης δὲ βραχύτητι, κράτιστος δὲ οὗτος αὐτοσχεδιάζειν τὰ δέοντα ἐγένετο.'

R. E. MACNAGHTEN.

THREE NOTES ON GREEK SEMASIOLOGY.

(1) WHEN substantives in *-τρον* properly denote the instrument of action of the verbs from which they are derived, why are *μήνυτρον* and other substantives in *-τρον* used to express the money paid for performing the action? I believe the solution to be as follows.

The very common substantive *λύτρον* meant properly the instrument or means of loosing (*λύσεως ὄργανον*). But the means of loosing was a sum of money paid by the ransomer to the captor (*λύσεως μισθός*); and this connotational meaning of the suffix in *λύτρον*—a word of vastly common occurrence, it should be insisted on, in the frequent wars of the Greeks—could easily give rise to such words as *μήνυτρον*, meaning, not *μηνύσεως ὄργανον*, but *μηνύσεως μισθός*.

(2) A second matter of semasiology that I would notice here is the connotational meaning of the adjectives in *-ικός*, which frequently mean, not pertaining to such and such a person or thing, but skilled in something. This secondary meaning was, I believe, reflected, so to say, upon these adjectives from their very common sub-

stantivised form. The whole process may be simply and clearly put in the following scheme involving two adjectives in *-ικός* of the same form, but with a difference of meaning: *ιατρός* medicus, *ιατρικός* medicinus, *ιατρική* (τέχνη) medicina (ars), *ιατρικός* medicinae peritus.

(3) The third point that I would call attention to here, is the secondary meaning of certain verbs in *-ίζειν*—a meaning which explains the disparaging force that we meet with in some verbs in *-ίζειν*. This is due to a latent reflexive pronoun. Thus *λακωνίζειν* is not to make another a Laconian but to make oneself a Laconian, to imitate or ape the Laconians. In the same way, it would appear, *σοφίζειν*, which properly and ordinarily meant to make another *σοφός*, could be used in the sense of making oneself *σοφός*, of aping the *σοφοί*. It is thus, I think (pace Platonis in Protagora), that we are to explain the good and bad senses of *σοφιστής*, 'teacher' (= *διδάσκαλος*) and 'charlatan' (= *τῶν σοφῶν μιμητής*).

MORTIMER LAMSON EARLE.

NOTES

ON HORACE *SATIRES* I. III. 7.

IT has apparently never been noticed that 'Io Bacchae' supplies a suitable method of voice-training. Modern teachers practise on 'ha,' 'ha-e-i,' 'ho-a-e-a-o.' Properly pronounced the Latin gives something very

similar. It is accidental to Tigellius' purpose that the words occur in Euripides. It is doubtless merely a coincidence, but it is an interesting coincidence, that the Gnostic word of power 'Iao' in the Pistis Sophia