

The Golden Bough for the Student of Vergil¹ _____

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After one has taught a subject for some time, especially a subject of fixed content like the works of our ancient writers, there is an almost fatal tendency to become stereotyped in attitude towards the subject matter. Either we do not see the breadth of the forest of the work in our efforts to explain the trees of difficulty, or in our zeal for the forest we neglect the trees and ultimately find that growth stops for lack of roots. It behooves us, then, as teachers (and all the more as students) of the great master whose life and work we are recalling today to pause occasionally, take account of stock, and see whether we ourselves are approaching our subject in the attitude of Aeneas of old, *rerum cognoscere causas*.

Whether the student comes to “the stateliest measure ever moulded by the lips of man” for the first time or after years of painstaking classroom work, he finds certain difficulties confronting him in the unusual constructions and artificial structure demanded by the hexameter verse. Even the mature student of Latin feels the sharp difference between the sonorous periods of Cicero and the apparently irresponsible order and lack of agreement in the parts of a Vergilian line. The vocabulary, too, presents trouble. New endings appear, proper nouns increase, and endless allusions are presented that lead the reader astray into all the bypaths of mythology, to say nothing of the broad highways of history and geography.

To meet these difficulties, two courses are open to him. He can equip himself with numerous texts, all more or less carefully edited, and proceed to swallow and digest the notes; or he can get his major interpretation from the Latin itself and the various sources it suggests. Both of these methods lead to the same fountainhead of authority, viz. to a knowledge of Greek. The thoughtful student of Vergil, the one who seeks to read between the lines and is not content to take the vocabulary rendering of the words and call it a translation, can no more

avoid the issue of Vergil's debt to Greek than the student of English Literature can shut his eyes to the part played by Latin in his mother tongue. As one of our English commentators says of Vergil, "The cultured circle for whom he wrote would probably have turned aside with contempt for a poem which relied wholly on native vigor and did not conform, at any rate outwardly, to one of the accepted standards of literary excellence."²

The touchstone, then, the Golden Bough, that opens to the appreciative reader the wealth of imagery and the delicate shades of meaning, marking the poet as a painter of pictures in words instead of a raconteur or powerful advocate, is a practical, working knowledge of Greek.

We delight in the *Eclogues*, which follow the *Idyls* of Theocritus so closely that one can easily imagine the pleasure that Vergil took in reproducing the older thought in a modern setting. We enjoy the *Works and Days* of Hesiod through the Italian atmosphere of the *Georgics*. We admire the skill with which the first six books of the *Aeneid* reproduce for us the wanderings of the "much-enduring" Odysseus, and the last six the martial tone of the *Iliad*. We check by means of translations the parallel accounts of the visit to Orcus (in the sixth book of the *Aeneid* and the eleventh of the *Odyssey*), the funeral games at the tomb of Anchises (*Aeneid* V) and those at the burial of Patroclus (*Iliad* XXIII), the making of the armor for Aeneas (*Aeneid* VIII) and for Achilles (*Iliad* XVIII), the final single combat of Aeneas and Turnus (*Aeneid* XII) and that of Achilles and Hector (*Iliad* XXII), etc. Some of us may even wish to trace such obscure allusions as the *dea—dignata cubili est* of the fourth *Eclogue* (*Odyssey* XI, 601). Allowing for the necessary loss in vividness and spirit which is always the price of translation, such studies are fascinating and indispensable to the student who would get a genuine understanding of Vergil's work and give him a fair rating among the great poets of the world. It is not our wish to accuse Vergil of "want of originality." Voltaire's terse retort to the charge that Homer wrote Vergil, "If such is the case, 'tis unquestionably his grandest work," needs no vindication. The Forum