

**ON TRANSLATING  
HOMER, LAST  
WORDS; A LECTURE  
GIVEN AT OXFORD**

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On translating Homer, last words; a lecture given at oxford by Matthew Arnold

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**MATTHEW ARNOLD**

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ON TRANSLATING HOMER.

# ON TRANSLATING HOMER

LAST WORDS

A LECTURE GIVEN AT OXFORD

BY

MATTHEW ARNOLD, M.A.

PROFESSOR OF POETRY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD, AND  
FORMERLY FELLOW OF CRIST COLLEGE

LONDON

LONGMAN, GREEN, LONGMAN, AND ROBERTS

1869

~~295. C. 19.~~  
304. L. 40

*Multi, qui persequuntur me, et tribulant me: a testimoniis  
non declinavi.*

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## ON TRANSLATING HOMER :

### LAST WORDS.

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BUFFON, the great French naturalist, imposed on himself the rule of steadily abstaining from all answer to attacks made upon him. 'Je n'ai jamais répondu à aucune critique,' he said to one of his friends who, on the occasion of a certain criticism, was eager to take up arms in his behalf; 'je n'ai jamais répondu à aucune critique, et je garderai le même silence sur celle-ci.' On another occasion, when accused of plagiarism, and pressed by his friends to answer, 'Il vaut mieux,' he said, 'laisser ces mauvaises gens dans l'incertitude.' Even when reply to an attack was made successfully, he disapproved of it, he regretted that those he esteemed should make it. Montesquieu, more sensitive to criticism than Buffon, had answered, and successfully answered, an attack made upon his great work, the *Esprit des Loix*, by the *Gazetier Janséniste*. This Jansenist Gazetteer was a periodical of those times,—a periodical such as other times, also, have occasionally seen,—very pretentious, very aggressive, and, when the point to be seized was at all a delicate one, very apt to miss it.

‘Notwithstanding this example,’ said Buffon,—who, as well as Montesquieu, had been attacked by the Jansenist Gazetteer,—‘notwithstanding this example, I think I may promise my course will be different. I shall not answer a single word.’

And to any one who has noticed the baneful effects of controversy, with all its train of personal rivalries and hatreds, on men of letters or men of science; to any one who has observed how it tends to impair, not only their dignity and repose, but their productive force, their genuine activity; how it always checks the free play of the spirit, and often ends by stopping it altogether; it can hardly seem doubtful, that the rule thus imposed on himself by Buffon was a wise one. His own career, indeed, admirably shows the wisdom of it. That career was as glorious as it was serene; but it owed to its serenity no small part of its glory. The regularity and completeness with which he gradually built up the great work which he had designed, the air of equable majesty which he shed over it, struck powerfully the imagination of his contemporaries, and surrounded Buffon’s fame with a peculiar respect and dignity. ‘He is,’ said Frederick the Great of him, ‘the man who has best deserved the great celebrity which he has acquired.’ And this regularity of production, this equableness of temper, he maintained by his resolute disdain of personal controversy.

Buffon’s example seems to me worthy of all imita-

tion, and in my humble way I mean always to follow it. I never have replied, I never will reply, to any literary assailant; in such encounters tempers are lost, the world laughs, and truth is not served. Least of all should I think of using this Chair as a place from which to carry on such a conflict. But when a learned and estimable man thinks he has reason to complain of language used by me in this Chair,—when he attributes to me intentions and feelings towards him which are far from my heart, I owe him some explanation,—and I am bound, too, to make the explanation as public as the words which gave offence. This is the reason why I revert once more to the subject of translating Homer. But being thus brought back to that subject, and not wishing to occupy you solely with an explanation which, after all, is Mr. Newman's affair and mine, not the public's, I shall take the opportunity,—not certainly to enter into any conflict with any one,—but to try to establish our old friend, the coming translator of Homer, yet a little firmer in the positions which I hope we have now secured for him; to protect him against the danger of relaxing, in the confusion of dispute, his attention to those matters which alone I consider important for him; to save him from losing sight, in the dust of the attacks delivered over it, of the real body of Patroclus. He will probably, when he arrives, requite my solicitude very ill, and be in haste to disown his benefactor; but my interest in