

**THE DUTY OF THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR
TO POLITICS AND THE TIMES: AN
ORATION, DELIVERED ON
TUESDAY, AUGUST, 5, 1856 BEFORE THE
LITERARY SOCIETIES OF THE WESLEYAN
UNIVERSITY, MIDDLETOWN, CONN.**

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The Duty of the American Scholar to Politics and the Times: An Oration, Delivered on Tuesday, August, 5, 1856 before the Literary Societies of the Wesleyan University, Middeltown, Conn. by George William Curtis

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GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

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BY
GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS.

NEW YORK:
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1856.

TO

JOSIAH QUINCY,

The scholar and patriot, who, born with our great revolution,
has always illustrated the principles that made it
great, this discourse is, with affectionate
veneration, inscribed.

NEW YORK, August 23, 1858.

Quincy, Josiah, 1858, 23 Aug.

ORATION.

GENTLEMEN : The summer is our literary festival. We are not a scholarly people, but we devote to the honor of literature some of our loveliest days. When the leaves are greenest, and the mower's scythe sings through the grass ; when plenty is on the earth, and splendor in the heavens, we gather from a thousand pursuits, to celebrate the jubilee of the scholar.

No man who loves literature, or who can, in any way, claim the scholar's privilege, but is glad to associate the beauty of the season with the object of the occasion ; and grace with flowers, and sunshine, and universal summer, the homage which is thus paid to the eternal interests of the human mind.

We are glad of it, as scholars, because the season is the symbol of the character and influence of scholarly pursuits. Like sunshine, a spirit of generous thought illuminates the world. Like

trees of golden fruit in the landscape, are the philosophers and poets in history. Happy the day! Happy the place! The roses and the stars wreath our festival with an immortal garland.

Too young to be your guide and philosopher, I am yet old enough to be your friend. Too little in advance of you in the great battle of life to teach you from experience, I am yet old enough to share with you the profit of the experience of other men and of history. I do not come to-day a mounted general. I hurry, at your call, to place myself beside you, shoulder to shoulder, a private in the ranks. We are all young men; we are all young Americans; we are all young American scholars. Our interests and duties are the same. I speak to you as to comrades. Let us rest a moment, that we may the better fight. Here, in this beautiful valley, under these spreading trees, we bivouac for a summer hour. Our knapsacks are unslung, and our arms are stacked. We give this tranquil hour to the consideration of our position and duties.

The occasion prescribes my theme; the times determine its treatment.

That theme is the scholar; the lesson of the day is the duty of the American scholar to politics.

I would gladly speak to you of the charms of pure scholarship; of the dignity and worth of the

scholar ; of the abstract relation of the scholar to the State. The sweet air we breathe, and the repose of mid-summer, invite a calm ethical or intellectual discourse. But, would you have counted him a friend of Greece, who quietly discussed the abstract nature of patriotism on that Greek summer day, through whose hopeless and immortal hours Leonidas and his three hundred stood at Thermopylæ for liberty? And, to-day, as the scholar meditates that deed, the air that steals in at his window darkens his study, and suffocates him as he reads. Drifting across a continent, and blighting the harvests that gild it with plenty from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, a black cloud obscures the page that records an old crime, and compels him to know that freedom always has its Thermopylæ, and that his Thermopylæ is called Kansas.

Because we are scholars of to-day, shall we shrink from touching the interests of to-day? Because we are scholars, shall we cease to be citizens? Because we are scholars, shall we cease to be men?

Gentlemen, I am glad that, speaking of the duty of the American scholar to the times, I can point to one who fully understands that duty, and has illustrated it, as Milton did. Among fellow-countrymen, that scholar falls defending