

ON THE USE OF SAXON AND CLASSIC WORDS.



THE English language as it is spoken and written at the present day, is a mixture of the original Saxon, and words derived from various other languages, particularly from the Latin and the Greek. My object in this short essay is to show that the classic portion of the English language is absolutely necessary in the performance of separate and distinct functions, and to point out the great obstacle which, it seems to me, must be surmounted ere we can acquire a true, correct and simple style of speaking and writing. I know there are those who possess a strong partiality for the plain and simple Saxon, which conveys to their minds so many pleasant remembrances of former days, and others who in their efforts to appear learned, affect to despise the homely language of their forefathers, and whose "sensibilities would be dreadfully lacerated" were they told of it.

While it is very true, that the Saxon by itself possesses almost all the requisites of a perfect language, namely conciseness, elegance, simplicity and force, still we cannot fail to appreciate that classic part which is indispensable to subtlety of thinking, and which at the same time affords us a vast resource from which we may at any moment draw. No one knew better than Shakespeare the strength of the "pure and undefiled" Saxon. No other writer has expressed so many difficult shades of meaning, or portrayed passions virtues and vices with such consummate skill.

Every reader of Shakespeare must have noticed, that from the passages of movement and passion all difficulties and obscurities are removed. It is this simplicity and unity which render Shakespeare dear to the heart of every English student. Notice with what force he describes the treachery of the Thane of Cawdor and Lady Macbeth.

"That is a step
On which I must fall down or else o'erleap
For in my way it lies. Stars hide your fires
Let not light see my black and deep desires,
The eye wink at the hand. Yet let that be
Which the eye fears when it is done, to see."

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"Give me the daggers : The sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures, 'tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil."

But if Shakespeare knew the strength and cogency of the Saxon, he also recognized the importance of the classic.

In the same play he says :

"Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand ? No ! this my hand will
rather
The multitudinous sea incarnadine,
Making the green one red."

Now substitute for multitudinous and incarnadine any Saxon words whatever and the beauty and grandeur of the whole price is destroyed.

Addison's style of writing has always been looked upon as natural and unaffected, easy and polite, still he does not scruple to use classic words where they best suit his purpose. Speaking of exercise he says "Nature has made the body proper for it by giving such an activity to the limbs and such a pliancy to every part as necessarily produce those compressions, extensions, contortions and dilatations, and all other kinds of motions that are necessary for the preservation of such a system of tubes and glands."

Dr. Johnson, while unconscious of his own sin against simplicity, says, "that any one who wishes to attain an English style familiar but not coarse, elegant but not ostentations, must devote his days and nights to the volumes of Addison." Now, while Addison's writings owe much of their beauty and simplicity to the plain Saxon, still every reader of the *Spectator* will agree with me in saying that he is far from being adverse to the proper use of classic words. But I would not have it understood by what I have said, that in our endeavors to remedy a defect in the Saxon, we should make sense subservient to sound and call the most common things by the most uncommon names. Here lies the great danger. We are apt to be led astray in our earnest efforts, by high-sounding grandiloquent language, or what Lord Brougham would style "long-tailed words in 'osity and 'ation."

This hankering after pompous modes of expression is a great hinderance to plainness, simplicity and power of persuasion,