

times too often. You therefore, fair reader, understand, that for *your* accommodation, exclusively, I explain the meaning of this word. It is Greek,—and our sex enjoys the office and privilege of standing counsel to yours, in all questions of Greek. We are under favour, perpetual and hereditary dragomans to you. So that if, by accident, you know the meaning of a Greek word, yet, by courtesy to us, your counsel learned in that matter, you will always seem not to know it.

A palimpsest, then, is a membrane or roll cleansed of its manuscript by reiterated successions.

What was the reason that the Greeks and Romans had not the advantage of printed books? The answer will be, from ninety-nine persons in a hundred,—Because the mystery of printing was not yet discovered. But this is altogether a mistake. The secret of printing must have been discovered many thousands of times before it was used, or *could* be used. Not therefore any want of a printing art—that is, of an art for multiplying impressions—but the want of a cheap material for *receiving* such impressions, was the obstacle to an introduction to printed books, even as early as Pisistratus. The ancients *did* apply printing to records of silver and gold,—to marble and many other substances cheaper than gold or silver; they did *not* since each monument required a *separate* effort of inscription. It was simply this defect of a cheap material for receiving impressions, which froze, in its very fountains, the early resources of printing.

Now out of that original scarcity—affecting all materials proper for durable books, which continued up to times comparatively modern—grew the opening for palimpsests. Naturally, when once a roll of parchment or vellum had done its office, by propagating, through a series of generations, what once had possessed an interest for them,—but which, under changes of opinion or taste, had faded to their feelings, or had become obsolete for their undertakings, the whole *membrana* or vellum skin, the twofold product of human-skill, costly material, or costly freight of thought, dropped in value concurrently,—supposing that each were inalienably associated to the other.

Hence it arose in the middle ages, as a considerable object for chemistry, to discharge the writing from the roll,—and thus to make it available for a new succession of thoughts.

In that monkish chemists succeeded, but after a fashion which seems almost incredible,—incredible, not as regards the extent of their success, but as regards the delicacy of restraints under which it moved,—so equally adjusted was their success to the immediate interests of that period, and to the reversionary objects of our own. They did the thing,—but not so radically as to prevent us from undoing it. They expelled the writing sufficiently to leave a field for the new manuscript,—and yet not sufficiently to make the traces of the elder manuscript irrecoverable for us.

Had *they* been better chemists, had *we* been worse, the mixed result, viz., that dying for *them*, the flower should revive for us, could not have been effected. They did the thing proposed to them; they did it effectually, for they founded upon it all that was wanted,—and yet ineffectually, since we unravelled their work, effacing all above, which they had superscribed, restoring all below, which they had effaced.

What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain. Such a palimpsest is my brain; such a palimpsest oh reader! is yours. Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before.—And yet, in reality, not one has been extinguished. Yes, reader, countless are the mysterious handwritings of grief or joy, which have inscribed themselves successively upon the palimpsest of your brain,—and—like the annual leaves of aboriginal forests, or the undissolving snows on the Himalaya, or light falling upon light—the endless strata have covered up each other in forgetfulness. But by the hour of death,—but by fever,—but by the searchings of opium; all these can revive in strength. They are not dead but sleeping.

The bewildering romance, light tarnished with darkness, the semi-fabulous legend, truth celestial, mixed with human falsehoods, these fade, even of themselves, as life advances. The romance has perished that the young man adored; the legend has gone