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ART. I.—*The Poet Homer's References to Medicine.* By J. C. McMECHAN, M. D., Cincinnati.

HOMER was one of the most splendid geniuses of antiquity; but, whoever sits down to read his "Iliad," must remember he is about to peruse the most ancient book in the world next to the Bible. Without making this reflection, he cannot enter into the spirit nor relish the composition of the author. Homer's gods, it must be confessed, though they are always lively and animated figures, yet sometimes want dignity. It is well known that the battles and woundings of the gods gave so much scandal to Plato,[1] that he wished to cast Homer out of his "Republic," much to the indignation of Heraclides Ponticus. In apology for Homer, it must be remembered that, according to the fables of those days, the gods are but one remove above the condition of men. They have all human passions. They drink and feast, and are vulnerable, like men; they have children and kinsmen in the opposite armies; and, except that they are immortal, that they have houses on the top of Olympus, and winged chariots in which they are often flying down to earth, and then reascending in order to feast

[1] Alleg. Hom., p. 511.

on nectar and ambrosia, they are in truth no higher beings than the human heroes, and therefore very fit to take part in their contentions.

The beautiful propriety with which Homer treats every subject that he touches on, may be seen in his never describing a wound as mortal, except when it is inflicted in a part really vital. The principal physicians that accompanied the army against the Trojans were Machaon and Podalirius, the sons of Æsculâpius. They did not confine themselves to attending the wounded, but both led wings of the army.

Their renown [1] as surgeons and physicians extended beyond the "Iliad," for they are referred to in the subsequent poem of Arctinus the Ilia-Persis, wherein the one was represented as unrivalled in surgical operations, the other as sagacious in detecting and appreciating morbid symptoms. It was Podalirius who first noticed the glaring eyes and disturbed deportment which preceded the suicide of Ajax. It is said that Podalirius was the first physician, as well as the first person, who ever bled a patient in order to effect a cure.[2] Being cast in a tempest on the shores of Caria, he was rescued by a shepherd, who conducted him to Dametus the king, whose daughter had fallen from the top of the house. She was motionless and insensible. He bled her from both arms, and had the happiness of restoring her to life.

Podalirius and Machaon were held in high esteem by the army, for, in one of the battles, "Paris, the husband of fair-haired Helen, disabled Machaon — performing prodigies of valor—wounding him on the right shoulder with a triple-barbed arrow. For him then the valor-breathing Greeks trembled lest perchance they should slay him in the fight, and immediately Idomeneus addressed noble Nestor:

"'O Nelian Nestor, great glory of the Greeks, come ascend thy chariot, and let Machaon mount beside thee; and direct thy solid-hoofed horses with all speed toward the ships,

ἰητρὸς γὰρ ἀνὴρ πολλῶν ἀντάξιος ἄλλων
ἰοὺς τ' ἐκτάμνειν ἐπί τ' ἤπια φάρμακα πάσσειν,

[1] Grote, History of Greece, vol. i., p. 348.
[2] Renouard's History of Medicine.

for a medical man is equivalent to many others, both to cut out arrows and to apply mild remedies!"[1]

"Thus he spoke, nor did the Gerenian knight, Nestor, disobey. Forthwith he ascended the chariot, and Machaon, blameless physician, son of Æsculapius, mounted beside him." In this same battle, Eurypylus, one of the heroes, was wounded. He called upon his friend Patroclus to dress his wounds. This Patroclus proceeded to do, having informed him that "the physicians Podalirius and Machaon, the one he thought having a wound, were lying at the tents, one in want of ἀμύμονος ἰητῆρος, *a faultless physician*,[2] and the other awaiting the sharp battle of the Trojans upon the plain.

Patroclus, laying him down at full length, cut out with a knife the bitter, sharp arrow from his thigh, and washed the black blood from it with water:

ἐπὶ δὲ ῥίζαν βάλε πικρὴν
χερσὶ διατρίψας ὀδυνήφατον ἣ οἱ ἀπάσας
ἴσχ' ὀδύνας, τὸ μὲν ἕλκος ἐτέρσετο, παύσατο δ' αἷμα,[3]

"*Then he applied a bitter, pain-assuaging root, rubbing it in his hands, which checked all his pangs; the wound indeed was dried up and the bleeding ceased.*" Menelaus, one of the chief heroes of the "Iliad," being wounded, Machaon was sent for. The herald, approaching him, said:

"'Come, O son of Æsculapius, Agamemnon, king of men, calls thee that thou mayest see martial Menelaus, the son of Atreus, whom some skilful archer of the Trojans or of the Lycians has wounded with a dart.'[4]

"Thus he spoke, and they proceeded to go through the host, through the wide army of the Greeks; but when they had now arrived where fair-haired Menelaus had been wounded (but around him were collected as many as were bravest, in a circle, while the godlike hero stood in the midst), instantly thereupon he extracted the arrow from the well-fitted belt. But when he perceived the wound where the bitter shaft had fallen, having sucked out the blood, he skilfully sprinkled on it soothing remedies, and which benevolent Chiron had formerly given to his father."

[1] Homer's Iliad, lib. xi., l. 514–515.
[2] Idem, lib. xi., 885.
[3] Idem, lib. xi., 846, *et seq.*
[4] Idem, lib. iv., 204, *et seq.*

The fatal woundings of the heroes were quite frequent. In book iv., in the fight between Diores and Pirus, Homer says: "The reckless stone which Pirus threw, struck Diores at the ankle, and entirely crushed both tendons and bones; in the dust he fell, stretching forth both hands to his dear companions, and breathing forth his soul. But Pirus, who struck him, ran up and pierced him in the navel with his spear, and darkness veiled his eyes." Æneas, in the fight between himself and Diomede, was almost fatally wounded.[1] "But Diomede, seizing in his hand a huge stone, such as no two men could carry—such at least as mortals are now; but he, even alone, easily wielded it—with it he struck Æneas on the hip, where the thigh is turned in the hip—they call it the socket—the socket he smote violently, and broke the hip, besides both tendons, and the rugged stone tore off the skin. But the hero, having fallen on his knees, remained so, and supported himself with his strong hand upon the ground, and dark night veiled his eyes. And there Æneas, the king of men, would have perished, unless Venus, the daughter of Jove, had quickly perceived him (Venus was his mother, who brought him forth to Anchises as he fed his oxen), but around her own dear son she spread her white arms, and before him she extended the folds of her shining robe as a defence against arrows. She indeed stealthily bore off her dear son from the battle." But Venus herself did not escape without being wounded. She was pursued by Diomede, who, having overtaken her, "wounded the feeble goddess in the extremity of the hand. Instantly the spear pierced through the skin, through her ambrosial robe (which the Graces themselves had wrought). Immortal blood, flowed from the goddess, ichor such as flows from the wounded gods. For they eat not bread, nor drink dark wine, therefore are they bloodless, and called immortal." Swift-footed Iris took her then in her golden chariot to high Olympus, and the goddess ever afterward entered not into bellicose affairs.

"Eurypylus, taking aim with his shining spear, smote Apisaon, son of Phansias, shepherd of the people, in the liver, under the diaphragm, and immediately he relaxed his limbs."[2]

[1] Homer's Iliad, lib. v., 301, *et seq.*

[2] Idem., lib xi., 574, *et seq.*

In book xvi., Diomede, who wounded Æneas, is represented as being wounded, and the physicians healing his injuries: "Brave Diomede, indeed, is wounded, and spear-renowned Ulysses is stricken, as also Agamemnon. About these, physicians skilled in many remedies are employed healing their wounds." In the same book the poet describes the fatal wounding of Sarpedon: "But Patroclus rushed on with his javelin, and the weapon did not escape him in vain, for he struck Sarpedon where the midriff encloses the compact heart. And he fell as when falls some oak, or poplar, or lofty pine, which the workmen fell in the mountains with newly-sharpened axes; so he lay stretched out before his horses and chariot gnashing with his teeth, grasping the bloody dust." Achilles is spoken of as taking the life of Lycaon in rather a scientific manner, or, rather, he displayed his knowledge of anatomy by wounding him at such a vital point:

"But Achilles, drawing his sharp sword, smote him (Lycaon) at the clavicle near the neck. The two-edged sword penetrated totally, and he prone upon the ground lay stretched out, but the black blood flowed out and moistened the earth."[1]

Perhaps the most interesting death of all the heroes of the "Iliad" was that of Hector. He had fought nobly through the whole war, and was looked upon as the greatest general of the Trojans. On leaving his palace to engage in the war, he had had a very tender parting with his wife, Andromache, and her prayer to him to remain at home is indeed beautiful. Said she: "O Hector, to me thou art both father and venerable mother and brother; thou art also my blooming consort. But come now, pity me, and abide here in the palace, nor make thy child an orphan, and thy wife a widow."[2]

On the day of the fight between Hector and Achilles, thousands of both armies were looking on, and the progress of the fight was watched with intense eagerness from the walls of Troy, by Hector's companions-in-arms. He was accoutred in the armor of Patroclus, whom he had slain, but Achilles had on the wonderful armor made for him by old Vulcan. After the fight had grown intensely interesting, the poet continues:

[1] Homer's Iliad, lib. xxi., 116, *et seq.* [2] Idem, lib. vi., 429, *et seq.*

"But the beautiful brazen armor of which he had despoiled great Patroclus, having slain him, covered the greater part of his body; yet did there appear a part where the collar-bones separate the neck from the shoulders, and where the destruction of life is most speedy. There noble Achilles eagerly drove into him the spear, and the point went out quite through his tender neck."[1] Thus perished noble Hector.

Homer had some very good ideas in regard to the procreation of the human and divine races. In the present state of the obstetrical science, when the human species can be continued by means of human spermatozoa, a syringe, and healthy female genitals, it may not be uninteresting to look back a few thousand years and see the *modus operandi* at that time.

Homer must certainly have believed in marriage, for he says, "Since whatever man is good and prudent loves and cherishes his spouse."[2] And again he says, "It is good to be mingled in love with a woman."[3] In the last paragraph of book i. of the "Iliad," the author makes old Jove a good family man: "But when the splendid light of the sun was sunk, they retired to repose, each one to his home, where renowned Vulcan, lame of both legs, with cunning skill, had built a house for each. But the Olympian thunderer Jove went to his couch where he lay before, when sweet sleep came upon him. There, having ascended, he lay down to rest, and beside him golden-throned Juno." This goddess afterward, wishing to aid one of the armies, applied to Venus, to give her the beauty and charms necessary to lure old Jove into ways of dalliance, that his mind might be drawn from the contending armies, and her favorites gain the victory, while "he was treading the primrose path of dalliance." Said she to Venus, "Give now to me that loveliness and desire with which thou dost subdue all immortals, and mortal men;" and Venus "loosed from her fragrant bosom the embroidered variegated cestus, where all allurements were enclosed. In it were love and desire, converse, seductive speech, which steals away the mind even of the very prudent—this she gave to Juno." She then ap-

[1] Homer's Iliad, lib xxii., 323, *et seq.*
[2] Idem, lib. ix., 341, *et seq.* [3] Idem, lib. xxiv., 130.

plied to Somnus, to close the bright eyes of Jove in sweet sleep, but he refused. However, when Juno promised to give him in marriage one of the younger Graces, fair Pasithea, whom he fondly desired day after day, he finally consented. Repairing to high Olympus, she met Jove, and sweet desire came upon him. Juno appeared quite timid, and seemed afraid the other gods would see them, but Jove said:

"'Fear not, O Juno, that any of the gods or men shall behold us. Such a golden cloud will I spread around that not even the sun may see us through it, although his eye is very keen to behold.'

"Thus he spoke, and the son of Saturn encircled his wife in his arms.

"And the divine earth produced fresh herbage under them, the dewy lotus, and the crocus, and the hyacinth, close and soft, which elevated them from the earth. Upon this couch they reclined, and clothed themselves above with a beautiful golden cloud; and lucid dew-drops fell from it."[1]

Milton, in his "Paradise Lost," imitates Homer in the above passage, when he says of the couch of our first parents:

—— "Underfoot the violet,
Crocus, and hyacinth, with rich inlay,
'Broidered the ground."[2]

The gods were not content to increase their progeny in Olympus, but descended to earth to lure weak mortals into ways of wickedness. In the second book of the "Iliad," Homer says: "These were Ascalaphus and Ialmenus, the sons of Mars, whom Astyoche bore to powerful Mars, in the house of Actor, son of Azis; a modest virgin, when she ascended the upper part of her father's house; but the god secretly embraced her."

Æneas (the son of Anchises), one of the heroes of the "Iliad," and also of Virgil's "Æneid," was partly of divine and partly of human origin. "Him to Anchises the divine goddess, Venus, bore, couched with him, a mortal, on the tops of Ida."[3]

Eudorus was born in a still more romantic way. Our au-

[1] Homer's Iliad, lib. xiv., 342, *et seq.*
[2] Milton's "Paradise Lost," lib. iv., 700.
[3] Homer's Iliad, lib. ii., lines 820, 821.

thor says: "Eudorus, clandestinely begotten, whom Polymela, the daughter of Phylas, graceful in the dance, bore her, the powerful slayer of Argus (Mercury) loved, beholding her with his eyes among the dancers at a choir of golden-bowed Diana—huntress-maid; and, immediately ascending to an upper chamber, pacific Mercury secretly lay with her; whence she bore to him a son, Eudorus."[1]

It seems that even goddesses bore children before the proper time for labor-pains to come on, and, what is still stranger, Juno is represented as being pregnant with twins, one of which was delivered at seven months, the other at nine. "And she was indeed pregnant of her beloved son; and the seventh month was at hand; and she brought forth him into light, being deficient the number of months; but kept back the delivery of Alcmene, and restrained the Ilithyiæ."[2]

Homer refers to the pains of childbirth in the following language: "And, as when the sharp pang seizes a woman in travail, piercing, which the Ilithyiæ, daughters of Juno, who preside over childbirth, send forth, keeping bitter pangs in their possession."[3]

The preservation of the dead body at the time of the Trojan war was well understood, and the heroic dead were highly honored. Patroclus, the dearest friend of Achilles, was slain, and the dressing of the corpse was conducted according to the custom of the day:

"But when the water boiled in the sonorous brass, then they both washed him, and anointed him with ointment nine years old; and, laying him upon a bed, they covered him with fine linen from head to foot; and over all with a white mantle." On the next day after this, when "saffron-robed morn was rising from the streams of ocean," silver-footed Thetis came and made a *post-mortem* injection into the body of Patroclus, in order to preserve it.[4]

Πατρόκλῳ δ' αὖτ' ἀμβροσίην καὶ νέκταρ ἐρυθρὸν
στάξε κατὰ ῥινῶν, ἵνα οἱ χρὼς ἔμπεδος εἴη,

"*And then she instilled into Patroclus through the nostrils ambrosia and ruby nectar, that his body might be uncorrupted.*"[5]

[1] Opera, *loc. cit.*, lib. xvi.
[2] Idem, lib. xix., 117, *et seq.*
[3] Idem, lib. xi., 269, *et seq.*
[4] Idem, lib. xviii., 348, *et seq.*
[5] Idem, lib. xix., 38, 39.